# PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITHOUT DISABILITIES

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# DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this study project is my own original work, and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university in order to obtain a degree.

# ABSTRACT

This qualitative study has placed a focus upon the experiences of inclusive education of parents of learners without disabilities. As the advent of inclusive education in South Africa has been accompanied by substantial political, social and legislative changes, an ecosystemic theoretical framework has informed the process of this study in order to acknowledge and better understand the influence of various contexts on individuals in their constructions of reality.

Recent South African policy documents have endorsed inclusive education as the conceptual framework within which previously disparate systems of educational provision can be united and learners of all abilities optimally accommodated. These documents have not only drawn attention to the need to recognise the rights and potential and actual contributions of parents to the process of education, but have also called for reporting on inclusive educational practice within various institutional contexts.

It is against this backdrop that this study has attempted through an interpretative and constructive research philosophy and design to access and interpret the perceptions and experiences of the parents who voluntarily participated in the research process. Permission was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department to conduct focus group discussions at a school which has included learners with Down Syndrome. Two focus group discussions were conducted with groups of parents of children without disabilities in venues provided within the school buildings. Participating parents were asked to reflect on their experiences of inclusive education initially as part of a written response to the research question and later through interactive discussion within the focus group. Follow up telephonic interviews provided member checks on the initial data analysis and enabled further reflections on the research question.

Data analysis was achieved through the constant comparative method of data interpretation. This process yielded patterns within the data which ultimately led to the formation of various categories which were grouped systemically to enable a holistic interpretation of the research results. The analysis of results revealed responses to various issues and a generally favourable attitude to inclusive education, particularly the degree to which the parents' children had been advantaged by an exposure to difference and the extent to which more realistic representations of disability had been constructed by the parents. Responses ranged from views concerning the implementation of government policy, difficulty with constructions of disability, concerns regarding the ability of the school system and particularly teachers to monitor and manage this change in educational policy, to more personal issues which involved the perceived benefits of socialization with learners with disabilities.

The implications of the study suggest that interactive discussion is a vehicle through which democracy can be actively practised, change can be positively mediated, solutions to educational challenges collaboratively constructed and partnerships between parents and schools more firmly established.

# SAMEVATTING

Hierdie kwalitatiewe studie van inklusiewe onderwys plaas die klem op die ervaring van ouers van leerders sonder gestremdhede. Aangesien die instelling van inklusiewe onderwys in Suid-Afrika gepaard gegaan het met aansienlike politieke, sosiale en wetgewende veranderinge, het 'n ekosistemiese teoretiese raamwerk die verloop van hierdie studie aangehelp, om sodoende die invloed van verskeie kontekste op individue in hulle formulering van die werklikheid te erken en beter te verstaan.

Onlangse Suid-Afrikaanse beleidsdokumente het inklusiewe onderwys goedgekeur as die konseptuele raamwerk waarbinne voorheen uiteenlopende onderwysvoorsieningstelsels verenig kan word, waardeur leerders van alle vermoëns optimaal geakkommodeer kan word. Hierdie dokumente het nie alleen die aandag gevestig op die behoefte aan erkenning van die regte en potensiële en wesenlike bydraes van ouers tot die onderwysproses nie, maar het ook versoek dat verslag gedoen word oor inklusiewe onderwyspraktyk binne verskeie institusionele kontekste.

Dit is teen hierdie agtergrond dat dié studie gepoog het om deur 'n interpreterende en konstruktiewe navorsingsfilosofie en -ontwerp, die persepsies en ervarings van die ouers wat vrywillig deelgeneem het aan die navorsingsproses, te bekom en te interpreteer. Met die vergunning van die Wes-Kaapse Onderwysdepartement is fokusgroepbesprekings gehou by 'n skool wat leerders met Down sindroom ingesluit het. Twee fokusgroepbesprekings met groepe ouers van kinders sonder gestremdhede, is op die skoolperseel gehou. Deelnemende ouers is gevra om te besin oor hulle ervaring van inklusiewe onderwys, aanvanklik as deel van 'n skriftelike antwoord op die navorsingsvraag en later deur interaktiewe besprekings binne die fokusgroep. Telefoniese opvolgonderhoude met groeplede het die aanvanklike data-ontleding voorsien en het gelei tot verdere besinning oor die navorsingsvraag.

Data-ontleding is gedoen deur die konstante vergelykende metode van data-interpretasie. Hierdie proses het patrone binne die data opgelewer, wat uiteindelik gelei het tot die samestelling van verskeie kategorieë wat sistemies gegroepeer is om 'n holistiese interpretasie van die navorsingsresultate moontlik te maak. Die ontleding van resultate het reaksies op verskeie kwessies opgelewer en in die algemeen 'n gunstige houding teenoor inklusiewe onderwys geopenbaar, veral die graad waartoe die ouers se kinders bevoordeel is deur blootstelling aan andersheid en die mate waartoe meer realistiese erkenning van gestremdheid deur die ouers geformuleer is. Antwoorde het gewissel van menings oor die implementering van regeringsbeleid, probleme met formulering van gestremdheid , kommer oor die vermoë van die skoolstelsel en veral leer- kragte, om hierdie verandering in onderwysbeleid te monitor en te bestuur, tot meer persoonlike kwessies wat menings ingesluit het oor die voordele van sosialisering met leerders met gestremdhede.

Die implikasies van die studie suggereer dat interaktiewe bespreking 'n middel is waardeur demokrasie aktief beoefen kan word, verandering positief bemiddel kan word, oplossings vir onderwysuitdagings samewerkend geformuleer kan word en vennootskappe tussen ouers en skole meer stewig gevestig kan word.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

# CHAPTER 4: DISPLAY AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

# CHAPTER 1 - CONTEXTUALIZATION AND ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Recent South African educational policy documents have advocated inclusive education as the conceptual framework which holds the most abiding promise of uniting and strengthening previously disparate systems and delivery of education and as a means of providing a better quality education to all learners (Department of Education, 1997; 1999; 2001). These policy documents have also drawn attention to the necessity to heed and facilitate the ongoing recognition of the rights and the roles of parents in making choices and informing policy with regard to educational matters. "The establishment of partnerships with parents is essential to the success of the inclusive approach to learning and development..." (Department of Education, 1999:61). Parents are thus viewed as integral to the building of truly inclusive educational systems where decision making and responsibility for outcomes become a shared and dynamic process.

Several schools and parent organizations have formally embraced the challenge of inclusive education and are presently grappling with various issues which the practice of a more equitable form of education has revealed within many school and community systems which were previously reflective of a more homogenous view of educational provision and social groupings. As parents of learners without disabilities represent a large community within the education system, their experiences and views can bear testimony to whether these previously homogeneously conceived educational and community systems are starting to reflect the kinds of ideological shifts which the transformation of both education and society require as a foundation for substantive change.

Much of the available literature on the perceptions and experiences of parents of inclusive education has emanated from long established democratic societies within Northern America and the European Community where a history of civil and human rights provides a source of community reference. Most of these studies have placed a greater focus on the views of parents of learners with disabilities, than the views of parents of learners without disabilities.

Even though the South African Department of Education has recently legislated that inclusion is official policy, there is a realization that different areas of the country will have differing capacities to implement inclusive policy and that "..regular reporting.." on progress within particular contexts will enable a more comprehensive understanding of the practice of inclusive education (Department of Education,1999:10; 2001:20).

## 1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is seen to be the " ...outermost frame..., .... the body of literature, the disciplinary orientation that you draw upon to situate your study" (Merriam, 1998:47). This study will use the framework of ecosystemic theory in which to situate the potential shifts in values, related perceptions and differing experiences of parents that the challenge of inclusive education can make apparent.

Contemporary South African scholarship has advocated ecosystemic theory as the set of organizing principles most suited to an understanding of the current challenges in South African education and society (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 1997:34-39; Engelbrecht, 1999:3-5; Green, 2001:7-8). Current conceptions of ecosystemic theory have been largely influenced by the ecosystemic model of human development propounded by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and the model of systemic thinking and associated rules for the analysis and synthesis of interdependent contexts proposed by Jordaan and Jordaan (1998).

Fundamentally, ecosystemic theory is based on an understanding of the interaction between developing individuals and various contexts (Green, 2001:7) and has grown from a synthesis of ecological and systems theories (Donald et al, 1997:34). It offers a framework which allows for a comprehensive view of the individuals and groups which comprise human society in that it acknowledges both the interdependence and mutual shaping between man and his environment and the importance of an holistic understanding of the dynamic relationship between various organizational patterns or 'systems' within man's social context (Engelbrecht, 1999:4; Green, 2001:8). Man as an active agent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:21) in his individual and group constructions of reality is considered to be embedded in a variety of "nested" and interacting systems, such as political, community, school or family systems, which are considered to be "...open hierarchical organizations.." (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1989:41) and have particular identities where "...the functioning of the whole is dependent on the interaction between all parts" (Donald et al, 1997:8).

Even though systems are seen to have distinct identities they have to attempt to accommodate change and adapt to forces within the general social context and more local community contexts. As systems are seen to be inextricably interrelated, a change in one system is seen to lead to change within an entire web of systems (Donald et al, 1997:34). It is thus that ecosystemic theory is seen to be the most enabling framework within which to situate an inquiry into the experiences of parents regarding a change in the ideology and form of educational provision within a society which is attempting to accommodate "... the wider notion of inclusion in society..." (Engelbrecht, 1999:5).

As ecosystemic theory it is rooted in the belief that individuals are active participants in their constructions of the external environment and that individuals are situated within various immediate and broader interacting contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:21), it is synchronous with a qualitative approach to

inquiry that seeks to interpret multiple constructions of reality in dynamic and interactive ways.

South African society is currently in the process of transformation from an externally imposed, often passively received and dissonant versions of social reality to more dynamic, personally mediated and participative constructions of external environments (Donald et al, 1997: 16-17). Ecosystemic theory allows for an understanding of such paradigmatic changes as it is cognizant of how different levels of the social context are linked in dynamic, interdependent and interacting relationships and that changes in the overarching political, economic and cultural values and practices within society will inevitably affect individuals within more immediate and intermediate systems and contexts.

The particular ecosystemic framework which this study will employ in its review of the literature and display and discussion of results is adapted from a portrayal of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological environment. In order to represent different degrees of interacting systems, information will be clustered into macro, exo, meso and micro systems.

- Macrosystem

This system is seen to represent the overarching societal and legislative forces and associated values and beliefs which both affect and may be affected by all other system levels (Apter, 1982:61; Donald et al, 1997:58). For the purposes of this study the forces which are seen to comprise the macrosystem include the process of globalization, the philosophy of inclusion, international perspectives on inclusive education, social constructions of ability and disability and the struggle towards the achievement of an inclusive society.

- Exosystem

This level is seen to be an extension of the mesosystem which is a system of smaller or microsystems. It incorporates both distinct and evolving social institutions that do not actually contain or actively involve the individual, but which have the potential to influence individual lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:25; Donald et al, 1997:58). Factors which are considered to be exosystemic in this study are the legacy of Apartheid legislations, the current South African Educational system and its associated policy documents, organizations such as those which represent the rights of people with disabilities, issues of funding within the local government and the personnel competencies and educational practices within the local school environment.

- Mesosystem

This level comprises interrelationships between the various settings in which the individual actively participates such as the relationship between families, schools and religious organizations. In this study the mesosystem incorporates the relationship between families and the local school system and the interactions between families with learners with disabilities and families with children without disabilities. For the purposes of this study the exo and meso systems have been linked.

- Microsystem

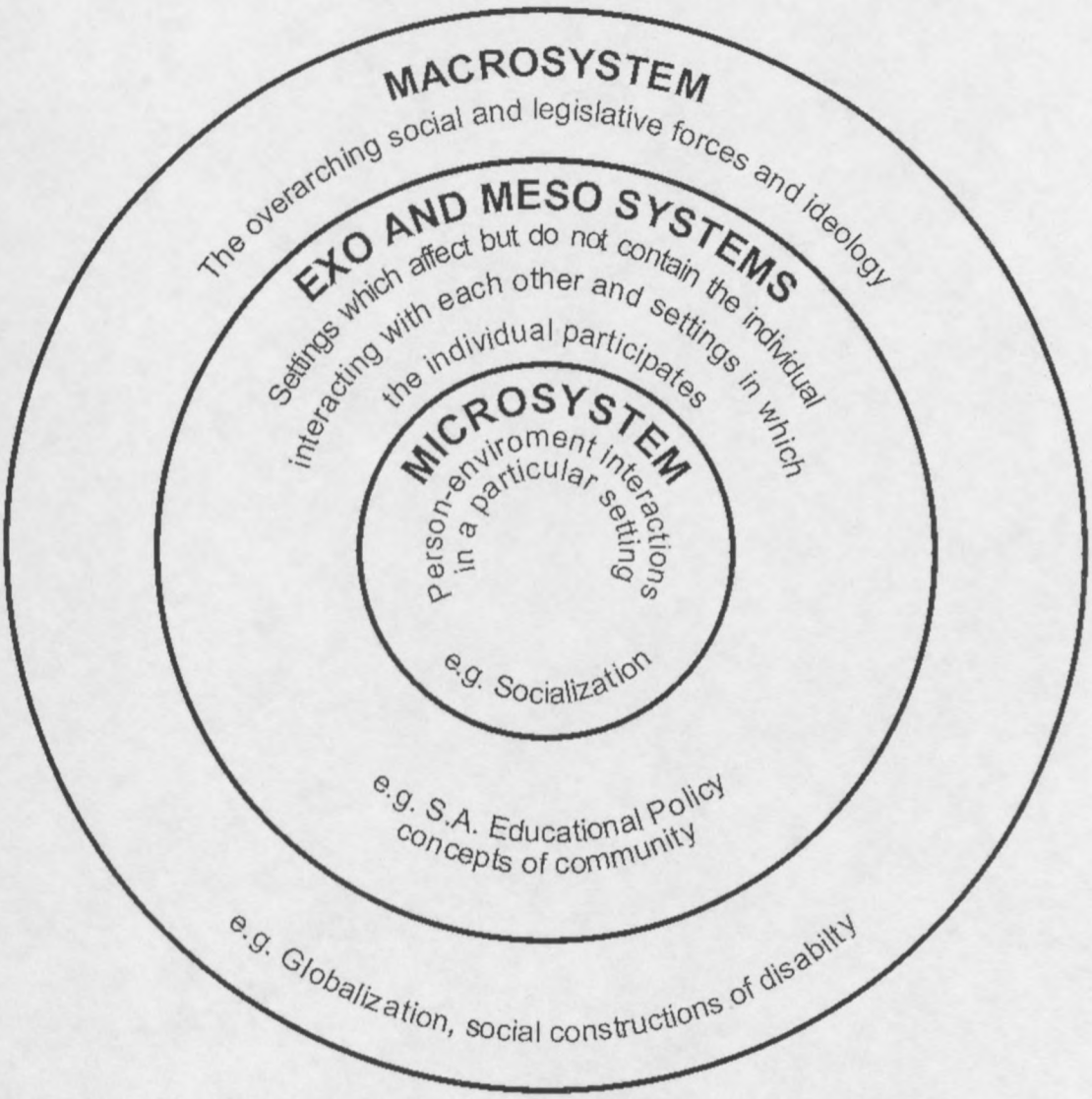
Bronfenbrenner (1979, 22) describes this level as being:

> "... a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics".

Issues which have been represented within the microsystem in this study are the processes of interactive data gathering, participants' experiences regarding socialization, perceptions of the nature of learner's peer relationships and individual constructions of ability and disability.

# REPRESENTATION OF AN ECOSYSTEMIC MODEL

**(adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological environment in Apter, 1982: 61)**



## 1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As parents form part of interrelated social, political and cultural contexts and their views are seen as integral to the development of educational practice, it is important to examine the factors illustrated within current literature, "..existing scholarship.." (Mouton, 2001:87) and personal interpretations which may have impacted upon or shaped their choices, attitudes and experiences, both globally and more particularly within a specific South African context (Engelbrecht, 1999:5). Relatively little research has been done in the area of perceptions and experiences of parents of learners without disabilities. As these parents form the majority of parents in any inclusive setting, it is felt that it is both prudent and necessary to provide a forum for their views to be heard. It is against this background that the following research question has been formulated as:

**"What are the experiences of inclusive education of parents of learners without disabilities within a specific context?".**

## 1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The formulation of the research question has generated both short and long term objectives for this study.

The primary short-term objectives are to make known the common themes amongst the experiences and perceptions of parents of children without disabilities regarding inclusive educational practices and to frame these into categories which enable a reflection upon their responses within broader contextual issues (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1989: 48).

The longer term objective of this research project has been to allow different voices to add to the ongoing literature and research into inclusive educational practices and policy. It is felt that it is necessary that at this stage of the inclusion experience in South Africa that policy makers and advocates of inclusion need to become more reflective, more aware of their inclusive constituency and thus "become listeners" (Department of Education, 1999:34 (2.26); Slee, 1999:204).

## 1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### 1.5.1 Research Design

As the focus of the research question is directed at personal experiences attributed to the implementation of a policy change in educational practice, the research design is qualitative and will be undertaken from an interpretive/constructivist viewpoint (Bothma, Gravett & Swart, 2000:200; Mertens, 1998:161). This viewpoint or research paradigm considers that reality is socially constructed through the human minds of both the researcher and the research participants and that it is possible to apprehend these multiple constructions as "text" which contains various layers of meaning (Mertens,1998:11; Miles & Huberman, 1994:8). In order to access multiple constructions of reality, personal and interactive data collection methods are preferred and the values which guide the researcher are made explicit as these are seen to form part of the research product (Mertens, 1998:13).

It is anticipated that a qualitative design will allow for a more contextual and holistic analysis of emerging challenges in the policy and practices of inclusive education and that qualitative approaches will enable information rich descriptions of the research process and the emerging reality constructions related to the experiences of individuals and interactions amongst the research participants (Mertens, 1998: 171).

### 1.5.2 Methodology

#### 1.5.2.1 Data Collection Methods

Prior to proceeding with data collection, permission to conduct this research will be sought from the Western Cape Education Department.

- Literature Review

This will be undertaken from an ecosystemic theoretical perspective in order to gain a holistic and dynamic perspective of the challenges and issues influencing the practice of inclusive education and to better inform the particular situations and experiences of individuals and groups within a local context. It is anticipated that this approach to the review of literature will allow for a clearer definition of the research question and provide a macro, exo/meso and micro systemic based frame of reference for the portrayal of the data collected and the discussion of the results.

A preliminary review of recent literature in the area of inclusive education has revealed a nascent literature base which reflects the perceptions and experiences of inclusive education of parents of learners without disabilities.

- Interviews with the Parents of Children with Disabilities

These interviews will be undertaken before other data collection methods proceed. The purpose of these interviews will be primarily to explain the objectives of the research project to each parent, to obtain their permission to interview parents within their children's classes, and to gain background information as to their experiences of inclusive education.

- Focus Group Interviews

It is anticipated that the main body of data which will be collected will be as a result of the verbatim transcriptions of two separate focus group interviews with parents of learners without disabilities. These interviews will undertaken within the school environment. One focus group will consist of parents of learners who are currently in Grade 3 and the other focus group will consist of parents of learners who are in Grade 6. It is anticipated that these two groups of parents, through their varying lengths of exposure to inclusive education and the different ages of their children, will offer differing experiences and perceptions of inclusive education.

- Semi Structured Questionnaires

The research participants within these two separate focus groups will be given a semi-structured questionnaire to complete before the focus group interviews proceed. The purpose of this questionnaire will be to gain some details as to the number of years each parent's child has been situated in an inclusive classroom, a brief description of each participant's background and community and a written response to the open-ended question: "What are your experiences of inclusive education?"

- Follow-up Telephone Interviews

Follow-up telephone interviews will be undertaken a month after the focus group interviews in order to check the emerging data analysis with the participants and to offer each participant the opportunity to further reflect on his or her experiences of inclusive education and to add to the existing data.

- Field Notes

Field notes will be taken to record observations during the course of data collection and these observations will form part of the data which will be analysed.

- Researcher as Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher is the subjective vehicle through which both data collection and analysis is achieved. It is important, therefore, that the researcher has an ongoing dialogue which encourages self criticism and vigilance so that personal biases and limiting frames of references can be reduced, if not avoided (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:39-40; Mertens, 1998:175).

During this study the role of the researcher will be that of a facilitator of the group interaction and responses to the open ended question "What are your experiences of inclusive education?"

### 1.5.2.2 Data Analysis

Textual analysis of the transcriptions of the focus group interviews, field notes, written responses and individual interviews will be achieved through the use of the constant comparative method of data analysis as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994:127-149). This method uses a progressive analysis initially operating from main ideas emerging from the data, to an ongoing development of generating further categories of ideas from all data fragments. In order to limit bias that could arise from a single perspective to this form of inductive data analysis, a co-researcher will be invited to become involved in the comparison of themes and category formation.

### 1.5.2.3 Participants

The selection of parent subjects will be purposeful in that will be predicated primarily on the inclusion of learners with disabilities within their children's classes and the grade placement of their children. For the purposes of this study, two groups of parents, whose children are in two different grades in a specific school in the Western Cape and who have had varying exposure to inclusive education, will be invited to take part in focus group discussions.

### 1.5.2.4 Research Procedure

After receiving permission to proceed with the research from the Western Cape Education Department, an interview will be sought with the principal of the school in order to obtain his permission to conduct research in his school and to gain access to parents from two inclusive classes. Interviews will be then be arranged with the parents of two included learners with disabilities.

Letters explaining the purpose of the research and its place in a broader research project which is being undertaken by the Department of Educational Psychology and Specialised Education at the University of Stellenbosch, will be sent to the parents whose children have been in inclusive classrooms for at least one year. As this particular school changes the composition of classes with each academic year, it will not be possible to invite each parent from each inclusive class as many parents will have had only a few months' experience of inclusive education.

Before the focus group discussions proceed, the participating parents will be briefed about the purpose of the focus of inquiry and permission will be sought from each participant for the audiotaping of the discussion. Confidentiality of the information given will be assured.

Initial background information and written responses to the research question will be obtained through the use of a semi-structured questionnaire which each parent will be asked to complete before the discussion proceeds. The focus group discussion will proceed after a brief introduction by the researcher after which the same open-ended question used in the written questionnaire: "What are your experiences of Inclusive Education?" will be asked, but this time its purpose will be as an initiation to discussion. During the focus group discussions data will be captured by audiotaping the responses of participants. It is hoped that this form of unstructured focus group question will allow for a more equal relationship between the researcher and the group and also enable a freer flow of responses to the focus question (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989:87).

## 1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the purposes of this study, the definition of the following terms is considered necessary for the purposes of clarity:

- Perceptions

Perceptions are generally considered to be our primary sources of knowledge. Perception can be described as a 'giving of meaning' within individual minds to an awareness of stimuli in our surroundings which is produced by the operation of the senses (Elliot, Kratochwill, Littlefield & Travers, 1996:256). Different individuals will have differing perceptions according to particular past experiences, immediate social contexts and broader cultural and social contexts (Donald et al, 1997: 233).

- Inclusive Education

Before the term 'Inclusive Education' can be defined, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms 'Mainstreaming' and 'Inclusion' as these terms represent substantially different philosophies of schooling and consequent perceptions of and provision for the needs of learners. **Mainstreaming** is concerned with the learner being able to adapt to an existing system of education. It takes place when learners are introduced or re-introduced into general education classrooms when they are considered able to keep up or 'fit into' this particular system. There is no attempt by this existing educational system to adapt to the needs of the learner and support is only offered to enable better integration into the system (Department of Education, 2001:17; Moore & Gilbreath,1998:3). **Inclusion** is based on a philosophy of belonging and acceptance. Inclusion takes place when learners are welcomed into a system of education which is designed to respond to the needs of a diverse teaching and learning community. Inclusion recognises and celebrates the differences "...among all learners..." and is alert to overcoming various barriers to learning (Department of Education, 2001:17).

For the purposes of this study, **inclusive education** is seen to be the educational practice which has as its basic premise the belief that all learners can learn and should be "...empowered to develop their individual strengths.... and.participate critically in the process of learning" (Department of Education, 2001:16). It recognises that all learners have learning needs which have equal value but which may require varying forms and degrees of support (Department of Education, 2001:16). It requires that learners should be able to attend their neighbourhood schools and participate in learning environments which respect, accommodate and support diversity (Bothma, Gravett & Swart, 2000:200) and which maximise the participation of all learners in the curriculum and culture of the school and greater community. Inclusive education implies that learning environments should strive to accommodate all learning needs by encouraging a

continual alertness to various barriers to learning and development which include physical, social, curricula, attitudinal and instructional impediments to full educational participation.

- Parents

Parents are individuals who are the primary caregivers of their own biological children or those children who have been entrusted to their care and who are legally responsible for these children (Belknap, 1998: 44).

- Without Disabilities

Individuals without disabilities are individuals who do not have an "..actual, and in most cases a permanent deviation or loss in physique or functioning that can often be objectively measured" (Shapiro, 1999:44).

- Learner

This term describes any individual who is receiving education or who is obliged to receive education (S.A. Schools Act, 1996:Ch 1 2 A-4).

## 1.7 STRUCTURE OF PRESENTATION

This study proceeds in **Chapter 2** with a literature review of the factors considered important to provide a contextual matrix in which to place the focus of the research. **Chapters 3 and 4** are concerned with the research design, methodology, presentation and discussion of results. The **final chapter** sums up the findings and presents the related implications and recommendations.

# CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will attempt to provide a synthesis of the current literature which has the potential to contextualise and inform the research question and related research process. This literature includes texts on the issues which are considered to be influencing society in general, books and articles which discuss the philosophy of inclusion and the international and South African experiences of inclusive education. It also refers more specifically to the research done on the views and experiences of inclusive education of parents of children both with and without disabilities, as well as recent South African educational policy documents.

## 2.2 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND THE MACRO CONTEXT

### 2.2.1 The Movement towards Inclusive Education

"There exists today a global arena in which, whether we like it or not, the destiny of every individual is to some extent played out" (Delors, 1996:39). The post-modern world is currently evidencing an increasing globalization of human activity which is continuing to change the commonly conceived conceptions of nationhood (Hargreaves, 1994:52). The removal of the economic and political barriers which previously served to frame national identities, together with increasing access to universal communication, have disrupted the patterns of behaviour which gave a sense of regulation and continuity to peoples' lives. "All that will remain rooted within national borders are the people who comprise a nation" (Reich as quoted in Hargreaves, 1994:52). This new world holds great promise for the individuals who have developed the skills and insights to participate in its unfolding challenges and adapt to its flexible forms of

engagement, but it has cut adrift or excluded many citizens who are less skilled and whose energies are more directed to fulfilling basic needs (Delors, 1996:39-48; Hargreaves, 1994:47-64). Globalization is thus leading to increasing marginalization of many individuals and communities. Even for the world's economically and educationally privileged citizens, it is difficult to envision, let alone anticipate, and its emergence has created an uncertainty about the future which has made a truly common or inclusive response to global challenges difficult to achieve (Delors, 1996:39).

One response to the challenges of the paradoxes that globalization has made manifest in human society is the philosophy of inclusion. This philosophy is accordingly seen by many to be a global concern (Dyson, 1999:36, 2001:1; Engelbrecht, 1999:5-8; Skrtic, Sailor & Gee, 1996:142-157), one which is underscored by the dynamic enactment of the core democratic values of liberty, equality and human and civic rights within an entire social system (Engelbrecht, 1999:7; Swart & Pettipher, 2001:30). Barton, (1999:60) considers an inclusive society to be one which "... is concerned with the issue of empowering individuals, and engaging in constructive ways with the question of power". This process is seen to be enabled by inviting individuals to join in "social discourse" in which questions are asked about the philosophical frameworks which most advance the practice of democracy within a society "...in which diversity is celebrated and equality of opportunity promoted" (Engelbrecht, 1999:7).

The very broad scope of this philosophy, however, poses some problems as ambiguities and differing views make a consensual interpretation difficult to establish (Dyson, 2001:1). This situation has led some commentators to refer to inclusion as being protean in its formulations (Dyson, 1999:37;Lloyd, 2000:154), and others to say that it is often used as a "..vague synonym for change for the better" (Farrell, 2000:154; Murphy, 1996:470).

Booth (in Dyson, 2001:1) argues that inclusion can only be understood within specific "..national systems and cultures". Within the South African political and societal contexts the notion of inclusion concerns the movement of a transforming society towards a functional democracy within which all its citizens are active participants and where diversity is respected and celebrated (Swart & Pettipher, 2001:469). Advocates of inclusion generally operate from a human and civil rights perspective and view inclusion as a life philosophy which links education and socialization within communities to the development and maintenance of democratic societies (CSIE, 1997:4-10; Skrtic, Sailor & Gee, 1996:142-157). They assert that human diversity should be valued, that notions of disability should be reconstructed (Dyson & Forlin 1999:26) or in fact deconstructed (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997: 357-366) and that all children belong in their neighbourhood schools and should have 'full membership" (Lipsky & Gartner 1999: 12-23) within the human community. Inclusion is seen to be to the benefit of all children, those with and without disabilities (Grove & Fisher,1999:208). The inclusion movement therefore advocates that whole school approaches need to be developed to ensure a shared vision of embracing diversity, together with an ongoing review of restrictive curricula and methods of instruction and the enlisting of community involvement. Support should be provided and instruction adapted to cater for individual needs within general classroom settings (Giangreco, 1997:198) and age appropriate peers serve to provide positive role models, tutors and 'potential friends' (Lombardi, Nuzzo, Kennedy & Foshay, 1994:315) to learners with disabilities.

Internationally the move towards Inclusive Education adopted the phrase 'Education for All' in its advocacy to reform education from a perceived disability and exclusionary view of diversity among learners, to unitary education systems which would recognise and embrace differences and provide quality education for all learners within their local contexts. International conferences such as the World Conference of Education for All in Thailand in 1990 and the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (UNESCO,1994) reflected and formalised this movement and

its intent and associated requirement to accept diversity within inclusive educational systems.

The move towards this acceptance of diversity was championed as a liberation from the historically reductionistic and deficit-driven views of difference, to a constructivist and emancipatory paradigm which would release the learner to become an agent in his or her own making of meaning (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 1997:64; Poplin 1988b 389-400), rather than being exposed to "the meanings others have created" (Poplin 1988a: 401), especially those meanings which oppressed and labelled individuals according to socially constructed and uncritically accepted sorting categories.

Inherent in this change of perceptions and associated practices was the expected resistance of those stakeholders who wanted to protect the status quo for reasons which included a maintenance of the balance of power and the protection of vested interests (Dyson, 1998:3). These stakeholders comprise, amongst others, educational practitioners, researchers and parents.

Practitioners were expected to resist this change as their professions and related livelihoods have been predicated upon a predominantly medical model view which considers disability as residing within individuals rather than within the various contexts in which people described as having disabilities have deterministically been located. Researchers would also be troubled by this change in perspective as much research traditionally viewed people as subjects whose actions and behaviour could be reduced or objectified to be studied, rather than fellow participants with whom meaning could be negotiated and who could be regarded as being at least equal participants in research projects (Dyson, 1998:1). Parents were expected to resist change as many would feel that equity-based educational decisions and practices would negatively impact upon their children's access to the types of educational and personal skills which have traditionally been perceived to give individuals the credentials to be better

equipped to compete in an increasingly global and competitive marketplace (Tomlinson, 1999:238-251).

### 2.2.2 The Inclusive Education Debate

Current journals and other publications bear testimony to the intense debate which the movement towards inclusive education has provoked. Part of the reaction can be attributed to the fierce rhetoric surrounding initial attempts at the mainstreaming of students with disabilities (see Chapter 1:1.6), and the scope of change required for inclusive education to be effectively implemented. These changes involve not only a challenge to established social conventions and arrangements, but also shake the commonly accepted knowledge base which guide assumptions about how the world works and the related issues of the purpose and restructuring of schooling (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997:357; Grove & Fisher, 1999:208; Hornsby, 1999: 152-153; Mamlin, 1999:36).

The advent of inclusive education has generally provoked an intensive ideological debate which incorporates differing philosophical views of the purposes of schooling. These views (as discussed in the previous section) range from the human rights driven and emancipatory-based assertions that all learners must be accommodated in local schools (Dyson, 2001:1-12; Lipsky & Gartner, 1999:12-23), to the more functional and sometimes elitist views that assert that mainstream schools cannot and should not cater for the needs of all learners (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994:23-26; Wilson, 1999:110-112).

Many critics of inclusive education view this reform movement as a formula that is driven by rhetoric, is thin on tangible outcomes and whose implementation has been inadequately assessed and researched (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995:22-26; Hornsby, 1999:152-157; Murphy, 1996:469-493; Wilson, 1999:110-112). Its implementation is seen to be driven by a minority of advocates whose main

constituency are learners with severe mental disabilities. It is considered to be most detrimental to those learners with mild disabilities (Carr, 1993:590-592) as its implementation is seen to threaten and possibly signal the demise of the specialised education provided to children with special educational needs (Hornsby,1999:152-157). It is also felt that "many educators, policy makers and parents...remain inadequately informed about inclusion and its potential ramifications" (Murphy, 1996: 469) and that the human rights arguments are confusing as to whose rights are being advanced; the child's, the parents' or those of other learners (Farrell, 2000:155). Functionalists argue that inclusive environments are being 'deliberately designed' (Wilson, 1999:110) to make learners feel included in a society which continues to demand certain kinds of excellence and external criteria such as benchmarks and examinations. Critics have also called into question the capacity of mainstream education to accommodate increasing diversity of learner needs and outcomes, to motivate for or maintain continued financial and in-class support for learners with special needs and to take responsibility for the progress of all learners in the classroom (Jenkinson, 1998:189-202).

Integral to the general inclusion debate are attempts to dislodge society's reflexive responses to the assumed reality of a disability construct by making people aware of the ways in which disability has been negatively mediated in the past. " We learn negative attitudes toward disability early in life from such strong cultural influences as school, the media, our language and literature. Many first encounters with literature, for example, include stereotyped characters like the childish dwarfs and hump-backed wicked witch in Snow White, .....". (Shapiro,1999:3). Organizations such as Disabled People International are attempting to redefine disability as an equal opportunity issue rather than a individual or medical problem, thereby drawing the attention of society at large as to how attitudes and other social restrictions are more essentially a description of disability than individual portrayals of perceived difference.

It is against this backdrop of international discourse that parents as prime mediators of meaning to their children have to interpret and construct the "prevailing values and ideas within the entire social system" (Engelbrecht, 1999:10) and the ideological issues and sometimes conflicting realities within their local contexts.

## 2.3 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND THE EXO/MESO CONTEXT

### 2.3.1 Introduction

The recent history of apartheid and minority group supremacy in South Africa predicates that the majority of parents of school going children were exposed to segregated and exclusionary schooling and discriminatory laws which impacted variously on all aspects of daily life. These limitations, although affecting differently described individuals and communities to different degrees, generally served to frame perceptions of humanity as being amenable to classification and privilege-related ranking, and also had the effect of confining a sense of community to externally imposed and government- sanctioned criteria.

In the current South African context, the concept of community is starting to reflect some of the transitions being experienced within society. No longer is community reflexively associated with racial delimitations within circumscribed geographical boundaries, but it is rather being conceived as a more natural and voluntary congregation of human beings who share common sentiments and have similar constructions of reality (Swart & Pettipher, 2001:31).

Sergiovanni (1994:4-6) views communities as being an expression of connections amongst people which are ".. socially organised around relationships and the felt interdependencies that nurture them". He refers to the German sociologist, Tonnies, who developed the theoretical metaphors of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* in order to describe two different "..visions of life" which can

represent the poles on a continuum of where to place or track descriptions of community. The more affirming *gemeinshaft* relates back to communities as conceived prior to the advent of an industrialised society in which community of kinship, place and of mind served to bind people together into a shared sense of "we" rather than the individual strivings of "I". The more secular *gesellschaft* refers to the kinds of relationships within society which are more contractual and impersonal and which encourage individual competitiveness in order to advance certain objectified goals. The theory of *gesellschaft* is evident in its most distilled form in the example of a Western corporation which is competing in a globalised area of business. The most telling psychological consequences of an extreme form of gesellshaft are loneliness and a feeling of alienation from any form of society (Sergiovanni, 1996 1-14).

Within schools a tension is often expressed between the Western notion of education, which traditionally has encouraged learners to compete against each other and make choices which are aligned to individual life plans, and the development of a commitment to communal values which promote moral skills and an awareness of the common good (Arthur, 2000:47). Sergiovanni (1996:14) suggests that the answer between the tensions between individual goals and a cultivation of the common good is that *gemeinshaft* should be actively cultivated within the *gesellshaft* which the organisational components of schools provide. Many argue that inclusive education provides schooling with an ideal opportunity to cultivate such a symbiosis (Lipsky & Gartner, 1999:17; Sands, Kozleski, & French, 2000.:5; Swart & Pettipher, 2001:31).

The advent of a democratic South Africa in 1994 and the associated abolition of apartheid made it possible for all citizens to "...enter into discourses of inclusiveness on all levels of society: constitutionally, legislatively and in terms of policies and processes of implementation" (Sayad & Carrim 1998:29). Of particular urgency was the need, expressed formally in various texts since the

early 1990's, to rethink and reorganize the provision and delivery of education as a vehicle to transform society (Du Toit, 1996:5).

Parents who were previously seen as being peripheral to any decision making in the educational system (Belknap, Roberts & Nyewe, 1999:173), were not only viewed as important stakeholders in the educational process and governance procedures, but were exposed to a change in mind-set considered integral to the overall social, political and economic transformation process which directly targeted issues such as equity and redress in attempts to correct the imbalances and fracturing of past educational provision.

### 2.3.2 Recent Education Policy Documents

The legislative transformation of education and associated shift in conceptual paradigm have been accompanied by many major policy documents, all of which consistently illustrate the need to restore human rights to all South African citizens, but especially towards previously disadvantaged and marginalised groups. The bedrock in which all subsequent policy documents have found their ideological and legislative foundations, is the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996. Principles elucidated in The Constitution which are integral to educational policy formulation are: education as a basic human right, quality education for all, equity and redress, the right of choice, the right to appropriate curricula and the rights of parents (Muthukrishna & Schoeman, 2000:315-335).

In its preamble, The South African Schools Act of 1996 (South African Republic, 1996) affirms the need for the recognition of human rights as delineated in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution as well as the urgency to effect democratic transformation through education. The preamble encapsulates the key points of which future education has to take cognizance and places immediate focus on the need to provide education of "progressively high quality" to *all* learners and the importance of upholding the rights of *all* learners, parents and educators (my

emphases). This initial text of the act illustrates the importance accorded to the emergence of inclusionary ideals as necessary for the development of democracy in society and in a move away from past "discrimination and intolerance". The Schools Act has in effect incorporated all learners in its ambit and thus has borne out inclusionary principles in that no separate legislation now exists for previously delineated special education. Section 20(1 (a)) of the act, refers to the ongoing recognition of the importance of parental and community involvement in the establishing of school governing bodies whose task amongst others is to "promote the best interests of the school and strive to ensure its development through the provision of quality education for *all* learners at the school". The right of parents to exercise their discretionary choice regarding their children's educational placement is acknowledged in Section 5 (6) where it is stated that educators much "take into account the rights and wishes of parents" of learners with special educational needs.

The past unequal distribution of educational resources, especially concerning learners with needs other than catered for by past mainstream schools, was directly addressed by the The NCSNET and NCESS Final Report entitled "Quality Education for all – Overcoming barriers to learning" - 1997. Not only did this document succeed in radically reframing perceptions towards disability as a shift from special need within individuals towards the wider vision of 'barriers to learning and development', but it acknowledged the need to restructure the entire education system so that it could be responsive to the range of needs that exist amongst learners and systems. Integral to the understanding of the causes of past failures was the identification of those factors which had contributed to the lack of responsiveness to diversity within the education system and society as a whole. One of the key barriers which was seen to impact upon a breakdown in learning and the maintenance of exclusion in the past was a "lack of parental recognition and involvement" along with the overarching barrier of "discriminatory and negative attitudes in society towards difference...."(Dept of Education, 1997:11-19). Recommendations to remedy past exclusionary

practices included the need to actively promote the rights and responsibilities of parents by acknowledging the critical role they play in the " planning, development and monitoring of education programmes and support, and assessment processes, and in school governance" (Muthukrishna & Schoeman, 2000:328).

The official government response to this report was published in August 1999 and took the form of a paper from the National Minister of Education entitled "Consultative Paper No. 1 on Special Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System: First Steps". This document makes repeated reference to the importance of creating a "seamless and inclusive education and training system" , the integral link between this need and the "constitutional obligation to establish an inclusive society" ( Dept of Ed,1997:68) and building the 'capacity' of the mainstream to gradually incorporate previously excluded and marginalised learners. There is an awareness of the fact that change will have to occur gradually and that teachers and others are overburdened with adapting to current curriculum changes and in fact are experiencing a "policy overload" (Dept of Ed: 1997:10). Parents and parent organizations are mentioned as being important collaborators in early identification of at risk learners (3,1.15), partners in planning and implementing inclusive strategies (3,2.26), integral to all assessment processes (4,7.10), sources of training and development programmes and general awareness campaigns (5,3.18) and recipients of targeted support programmes (5, 3.19).

In the Department of Education White Paper 5, Special Needs Education published in draft form in March 2000, the Ministry of Education enunciates the following:

> " A determination to establish an inclusive education and training system as our response to the call to action to establish a caring and humane society, and a recognition that within an education and training system that is engaging in multiple and simultaneous policy change under

conditions of severe resource constraints we must determine policy priorities, identify key levers for change and put in place successful South African models of inclusion" (P 9).

It is acknowledged that it would be rash to declare inclusive education as policy without paying due attention to the capacities of the various provincial systems to implement strategies successfully. To this end it is advised that due consideration has to be accorded to a "substantive understanding of the real experiences and capabilities of our provincial systems and education and training institutions, the setting of achievable policy objectives and priorities over time and regular reporting on these" (Dept of Education 2000:9). In the light of the above objective and the awareness of varying capacities to implement changes, it would seem prudent for researchers in South Africa to investigate or report on the experiences which have been gained by various stakeholders in current educational situations which are practicing inclusive education. With the publication of the Education White Paper 6 – Special Needs Education- in July 2001, inclusive education has become official policy. In his introduction, the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, personally invites "..all out social partners.....to join us in this important and vital task that faces us: of building an inclusive education system".

Within the Western Cape Department of Education the Directorate of Special Needs has formulated a new Learning Support Model which has as its primary goal the accommodation of Learners with Special Educational Needs within the mainstream of education. Rather than supporting the previous duality of mainstream and special education, it's aim is to "..have an inclusive system providing equal opportunities for all learners at various support levels" (Western Cape Education Department, 2000:5). Removal from the mainstream is considered feasible only when it is apparent that the learner is not benefiting from this placement and four levels of support ranging from full inclusion to temporary separate school placement are suggested.

### 2.3.3 Voice of Advocacy Groups

Concurrent with the emergence of texts concerning educational policy and provision is the recognition of the 'voice' of various advocacy groups, particularly those representing disabled people's organizations such as the South African Council on Disability (SAFCD) and The Deaf Federation of South Africa (DEAFSA). Several of these advocacy groups are parent-driven, such as The Disabled Children's Action Group (DICAG) and Down's Syndrome South Africa (DSSA), and their representations to the various educational policy groups have urged a move away from a welfare perspective towards a rights and developmental approach to disability (Muthukrishna & Schoeman 2000: 317; White Paper on an Integrated Disability Strategy,1997:15).

### 2.3.4 Teachers and Inclusive Education

As general classroom teachers represent the interface between learners and the school learning environment, their attitudes towards inclusive education and flexibility in the face of many theoretical, instructional and curricula changes are considered to be pivotal to the successful implementation of inclusive education (Green, 1999:128; Sands, Kozleski & French, 2001:4; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996:59; Swart & Pettipher, 2001:40).

In a review of the research on teacher perceptions of inclusion, Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996:59-73) analyzed the results of twenty eight studies published over the past forty years. Despite this extensive time span, the research synthesis indicated that the responses to common topics of relevance were highly consistent. The results indicated that the willingness of teachers to teach learners with disabilities appeared to be informed more by practical challenges within the context of the classroom rather than their personal feelings towards teaching learners with disabilities. The implications for practice which this

research synthesis suggests is that teachers need considerable supports in order to feel successful in an inclusive classroom. These teacher support needs are various and include more planning time, more systematic and specific training, in-class teaching assistance from teacher-aides and learning support teachers, additional teaching materials and specialized equipment, a smaller than average class size and a consideration of the severity of disability.

Vlachou and Barton (1994:105) stress the importance of the role of context in terms of teachers' perceptions and attitudes. Their research into teachers' attitudes towards the integration of learners with Down Syndrome revealed that teachers perceive their ability to respond to changes within the context of their immediate work environment as well as within the broader and rapidly changing social and educational environment.

Within recent South African educational literature there is an awareness that teachers have recently been exposed to a "policy overload" and consequent possible confusion about curriculum directions (Department of Education, 1999: 10), and that teachers generally lack in both an acquaintance with and an efficiency in working with diverse learning needs (Department of Education, 1997:107). As inclusive education is seen to be ".. the ultimate acceptance of diversity" (Green, 1999 b:128) and teachers are acknowledged to be underprepared for dealing with this diversity, the changes implicit in the successful implementation of inclusive education are likely to represent a source of considerable stress for teachers ( Engelbrecht, Swart & Eloff, (in press)). In a qualitative study which examined the attitudes a sample of primary school teachers towards inclusive education, Bothma, Gravett and Swart (2000:200-204) report that the teachers within the research sample seemed to have generally negative perceptions towards inclusion. Three areas of concern were identified, these being concerns regarding learners, the teacher and government educational policy. In respect of the learners, the perception was that specialised educational placements still provided the best option for learners with special

needs, that inclusive education would impact negatively on the self-esteem of learners with special needs and that the 'normal' learner would be disadvantaged by the extra time and attention which it was expected that the learner with special needs would demand in this environment. The concerns regarding the teacher related to their feeling that teachers had not been sufficiently trained to deal with learners with special needs and that this kind of work was specific to a choice option which was seen as a separate area of interest in teacher training. The participants also felt that teachers were currently struggling with enough challenging issues within their current class compositions due to changes within society which had the effect of destabilising the support teachers had traditionally received from parents. With regard to government policy, it was felt that the implications of recent policy documents were that an extra burden was being placed on teachers and that these documents had not taken the needs of teachers into account nor had teachers been sufficiently consulted or involved in the planning of these policy changes.

This feeling of being excluded from the process of planning and implementation of inclusive education is one which seems to be shared by many general education teachers, not only those within South Africa. "The concerns of general education teachers should be squarely and honestly addressed if they are to be prepared to manage and teach in inclusive classrooms" (Kochhar, West & Taymans,2000:vi).

Integral to the moral and practical support of individual teachers in inclusive classrooms is the development of a sense of community within school organizations. This involves a transformation of traditional roles, organizational hierarchies and conceptions about the teaching and learning process. It represents a ongoing process of school development which is underscored by shared values, a commitment to serve all learners and the practice of collaborative consultation amongst staff, teachers and other agencies in which the responsibility for the success for inclusive education is experienced to be the

work of the whole school and wider community rather than individual teachers (Kochhar et al, 2000:20; Swart & Pettipher, 2001:30-44).

The attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education as well as the need for school restructuring in order to respond to learner diversity has significant implications for teaching training in general but more specifically for the change in role of learning support teachers. "Rather than preparing them to work intensively with individuals or small groups of children, they need to acquire competencies that will enable them to take a lead in the developments of schools as learning organizations..." (Ainscow, 1997:6). Teacher training needs to emphasize and model the importance and practice of collaboration between all members of school communities and the interconnectedness between the development of attitudes, knowledge and skills. Slee, (1999:204) considers that current teacher education is "..about acquiring fragmented knowledge". Research into teacher perceptions and experiences of inclusive education needs to inform teacher training and support so that the stressors and associated feelings and frustrations which become apparent in the context of classrooms can be minimized and creatively addressed (Bothma et al, 2000:204; Engelbrecht et al, 2001:16 (in press)).

### 2.3.5 Inclusive Education in Practice

The implementation of inclusive education in various parts of the world over the past few decades has revealed many challenges which have encouraged a critical examination of the key values and practices which characterize successful inclusive learning communities.

Grenot-Scheyer et al (2001:5) have identified seven values which are considered to be "..fundamental to inclusive education". These values are the following:

- Inclusion and school renewal are linked
- Inclusion presents a clear and strong moral imperative
- Learning and belonging happen together
- Equity, access, and support are critical
- Students learn in different ways
- Inclusive education is beneficial to all involved
- Collaboration is essential

Recent literature has confirmed that successful inclusive schools are learner centred organizations which are democratic, reflective and collaborative communities. They are seen to be responsive to the needs expressed by all within the community and view diversity as a strength and opportunity for ongoing development (Grenot-Scheyer et al, 2001:5; Kochhar et al, 2000:8; Sands et al, 2000:23-40).

A critical feature of successful inclusive communities is the extent to which support is available in order that learning environments can effectively respond to a diversity of needs ( Department of Education, 2001:16; Green, 1999:128; Sands et al, 2000:26; Swart & Pettipher, 2001:42). This support system needs to be evident and available to the *primary* school context for learning which is the general education classroom, as this is where participants need to feel affirmed, sustained and enriched in the ability to achieve learning outcomes and where the attainment of learning outcomes is routinely assessed (Kochhar et al, 2000:8; Sands et al, 2000:24).

Additional funding for the implementation of inclusive educational practices is unlikely to be forthcoming in the near future as the redressing of past imbalances in educational funding and providing greater access to all learners has involved considerable financial assistance from the South African Government over the past few years. The Department of Education does not therefore expect that greater financial provision will be made available to

education in the near future and that the emphasis should shift from financial demands to the cost effective usage of current human and material resources (Department of Education, 2001:37).

The more economically advantaged constituency of parents in South Africa, although previously cocooned from the realities of education provision, are currently well aware of the financial constraints regarding the more equal funding of compulsory schooling for all learners. As Dyson and Forlin (1999:26) pertinently elucidate, inclusive education in the present South African context has generally more to do with an "...extension and development..." of educational provision rather than a "... relocation of learners, resources and expertise..." into "... an equally comprehensive and sophisticated regular education system". To many parents therefore the sophisticated vision of "...equity, redress and social development.." (Christie, 1999:160) enshrined in the recent policy documents has not been borne out in educational practice and this has created an uncertainty regarding the ability of education departments to ensure delivery of the kinds of basic knowledge, skills and attitudes with which parents wish to equip their children to become life-long learners in the less certain and rapidly changing post modern world (Delors,1996:47).

## 2.4 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND THE MICRO CONTEXT

### 2.4.1 Introduction

Parents comprise a large and increasingly visible constituency in educational endeavours. Due consideration is being given not only to their valuable insights regarding their own children, but also the integral part they play in the advocacy and effectiveness of educational reform (Bennett, Deluca & Bruns,1997; Seery, Davis & Johnson, 2000:268-278) and the potential their views and reactions have to "...the social validity..."( Duhaney & Salend 2000:121) of inclusion.

However there is a dilemma in representing parents as a homogenous group whose concerns, interests and expectations about the educational system are similar and consistent. It seems reasonable to expect parents to reflect the same kind of diversity which is now being recognised in the provision of education to their children. In their critique of the emphasis on parental participation advocated in governance structures in the South African Schools Act, Sayed and Carrim (1998:38) refer to the ".....very homogenized and static understanding of what being a parent means.." and later that parents are conceived as "...able to articulate static group-based interests". It is highly probable that many educators in South Africa would view parents as being extremely unsuitable and often unwilling partners in their children's education. It has also been argued that different communities, due to past inequalities in both relationships and access to information, have very different equity and advocacy expectations and that constructs of professionalism still impede true dialogue between parents and their children's education (Kalyanpur, Harry & Skrtic, 2000:119-136). It is also highly probable that dysfunctional families could be the cause of the existence of many learning related challenges which children have to overcome (Lloyd, 2000, 134).

Vincent (1996:44) has examined the issue of parental involvement or partnership in education in terms four different forms of engagement with the educational system. These four forms are represented by roles which the educational system currently offers the parent and are the supporter/learner role, the consumer role, the independent role and the parent-as-participant role. The supporter/learner role is one in which the parent assimilates the concerns and approaches of the teacher/professional and the consumer role views the parent as an indirect influence on the school system through the exercise of choice of schooling. Parent as independent is the role in which parents have minimal contact with the school and the parent-as-participant role is where parents have a say in the governance of the school and have a voice in the education of their

own children. To these four roles can be added one which the advent of inclusive education has made more apparent which is the role of activist or rather advocate for children with disabilities.

In the past parents were seen as independent to the school system (Belknap, 1998+:50). Attempts are being made to involve parents in education by making them aware of their rights and responsibilities and to enable them to become more equal partners in their children's education (Department of Education, 2001:50).

As inclusionary practices have become more prevalent both internationally and within South Africa, advocates, policy makers and researchers have tended to move away from the emancipatory based paradigms which powered the initial phases of this reform movement to more interpretive, socially constructive and constituency based appraisal of experiences of various inclusive situations. Administrators, teachers and parents have been considered to be key informants in this process of appraisal of best practices and identification of problem areas in which more support and training is needed.

### 2.4.2 The Role of Parents in Inclusive Education

Inclusive education in South Africa is currently being viewed as part of a broader agenda to unify school resources and integrate programs and specialised education services in ways to benefit all learners. Feedback on inclusive educational programmes is thus seen to be vital in informing the ongoing effectiveness of programmes (Bennet et al, 1997), the confluence of previously parallel streams of general and special education, and whether the desired intersections between social and educational reform are being achieved. Parents are well placed to report on whether their own and their children's behaviours and interactions are reflecting a shift in educational and community responses to diversity, or whether schools and related contexts are still seen to

be operating from the assumptive bases of homogeneity and uniformity which perpetuate the abundant social value previously attributed to ability.

Parents are also seen to play an intimate role in the socialization processes which form the "crucible" in which their children come to know and understand the world, other people and themselves (Staub & Schwartz, 2001:36). According to the Russian Psychologist, Vygotsky (in Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 1997:48-49), cognitive development is primarily achieved through social interactions and the opportunities and guidance provided by the environment. Parents are seen as primary mediators in their children's constructions of knowledge and providers of many of the varying contexts through which shared meanings can occur, including shared social constructions of ability and disability.

Many recent studies have primarily focused on the needs and experiences of parents of learners with disabilities (Bennett, Deluca & Bruns, 1997:115-131; Galant & Hanline,1993:293-297; Gallagher, Floyd, Stafford, Taber, Brozovic & Alberto, 2000:135-147; Green & Shinn , 1994:269-281; Lowenbraun, Madge & Affleck, 1990:37- 40; Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy & Widman, 1998:271-282). However, these studies are important as they reflect the expressed need for a more participant or constituent based assessment of current inclusive practice rather than the more advocacy and politically based research which seems to have characterised the early research conducted in this reform movement.

Common benefits of inclusive education experienced by these parents were advances in social skills seen to be linked to the availability of appropriate role models of behaviour, greater acceptance by peers without disabilities and various developmental gains especially in language and motor skills (Bennett et al, 1997). Concerns of parents of children with disabilities often relate to the fear of negative and rejecting interactions with peers, the loss or decrease of more individualised services for their children (Galant & Hanline 1993:293-297) and

the fear that general education teachers are unwilling or unskilled to accommodate their children "in optimal ways" (Gallagher et al, 2000). Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy and Widman (1998) found that parents of children with significant cognitive difficulties valued advances in social skills over the ability of their children to receive specialised education services. In a local study of the views of inclusive education of parents of children with mental disabilities, Parker (1999), found that the parents in her research sample expressed mostly favourable attitudes towards inclusive education provided that these placements were accompanied by support and resources.

The few studies, which have more directly canvassed the views of parents of learners without disabilities, tend to reflect commons fears and common positive trends in experiences of inclusion.

The common fears of parents are that being placed in an inclusive classroom may negatively affect their children's overall development and skill acquisition due to less than adequate attention from their teachers, and that children will learn undesirable behaviours from their fellow students with disabilities (Galant & Hanline, 1993:293-297; Staub & Peck, 1994:36-40). These fears tend to precede inclusive classroom placements and are usually dispelled by actual exposure to inclusion. In one of the earliest studies into the perceptions and experiences of parents of children without disabilities to inclusive placements, Bailey and Winton (1987:77-88) actually looked at the expectations which parents held prior to inclusive placement and then 9 months afterwards. These parents felt more positive towards inclusion after having experienced it vicariously and felt that it had helped their children accept children with disabilities and expose them to a more accurate picture of the real world.

The common positive perceptions seem to be that parents who have directly experienced inclusive education are more favourable towards inclusive practices than those who have had no experience (Giangreco, Edelman,Cloninger &

Dennis, 1993:77-91), and that parents who had experienced inclusive education may have acquired via their children's experiences "..less stereotyped and alarming representations of disability" (Balboni & Pedrabissi, 2000:149). In a survey measuring satisfaction ratings of parents of students with and without disabilities regarding their educational placements, Lowenbraun, Madge & Affleck (1990:37- 40) found that both groups of parents expressed similar satisfaction ratings with their children's educational placements and a majority of the parents of the children without disabilities indicated that they would choose inclusive classrooms for their children in the future. Giangreco et al (1993:74-91) also used a survey in which a Likert-like scale generated responses to statements relating to experience of inclusive education. The statistically analysed results showed that the majority of parents felt that their children were comfortable interacting with students with disabilities, that their children had shown positive social and emotional growth due to this exposure and that having a classmate with disabilities had not impacted on the quality of their child's educational instruction.

In an Italian study, Balboni and Pedrabissi (2000:148-159) used a questionnaire which targeted various aspects of inclusive education and received responses from 647 parents of students without disabilities. Their findings indicated that parents of students without disabilities became more informed and less fearful about disability and that inclusion represented an opportunity for "...humane and cultural growth". An analysis of the sex, age and socio-economic status of the responding parents yielded interesting results. It was found that the mothers had more favourable attitudes towards inclusive education than the fathers, that parents of high or average socio-economic status were more favourable than those of lower socio- economic status, but that age did not seem to have an effect on attitudes towards inclusion.

This current research project aims to access parents of learners without disabilities in a more direct but possibly less representative manner than the

preceding research into this area. Even though surveys and questionnaires are useful means of data capturing and can access people from a wider population, face to face interviews and focus groups have the potential of allowing research subjects to become truly participative. Through their actions, words, insights and interactions parents can help uncover the meanings and reflect the kind of struggles that are inherent in a shift in values and priorities. It is hoped that discussion around inclusive education will stimulate the kind of reflective dialogue in adults that is a necessary precursor to achieve lasting change in the "..values and ethics underlying public education policy"(Staub and Peck, 1995:39).

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

Parents whose children are situated within inclusive classrooms are exposed to many interacting cultural, political and community systems which have had varying influences over time and continue to have the potential to influence their perceptions and colour their experiences. International movements in education are now more prevalent in our conceptions of the universal provision of education, public participation in the process of policy formulation is more possible, and local issues engage us in many personal interactions which inform our daily reactions to various challenges within communities and schools.

# CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH DESIGN

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to formalise the focus of inquiry of this study, to place it in its "..broader societal context.." and to systematically explore whether the chosen method of research is appropriate to the nature of the research question, this section will present the theoretical grounding and related methodological details of the chosen research process (Silverman, 2000:100).

## 3.2 PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

As the primary objective of this study is to elicit and interpret the perceptions of the participating parents of learners without disabilities of their experiences of inclusive education, the research design is qualitative and approached from a constructivist and interpretative viewpoint within an ecosystemic theoretical framework. Its purpose is not to research the 'whole picture' of inclusive education but to concentrate upon and yield as true a picture as possible of the experiences and related interactions between particular individuals who are situated within a particular context.

However, operating on the periphery of this particular focus, are the broader political, social and cultural contexts within which these individuals have had to interpret meaning in the past and may continue to do so in the present. This awareness predicates that within both the literature review and data analysis and interpretation, due cognizance has to be accorded to the realization that the topic of inclusive education in South Africa has been accompanied by substantial political, social and economic change (Engelbrecht, 1995:5). These shifting

contexts suggest that the understanding and shaping of social and educational theory and related action would best be served by interactive and reciprocal processes in which multiple constructions of reality can be explored and compared (Bines, Swain & Kaye, 1998:66) and that data analysis has potential links with historical, social and political forces.

## 3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is often represented as a blueprint or plan (Merriam, 1988:6; MacMillan & Schumacher, 1998:33) which provides a framework within which is located the organizational aspects relating to the gathering, analysis and synthesis of information for the purposes of answering a research question or problem.

The research design of this study is what Merriam (1998:5) describes as being that of basic or generic qualitative research which has as its intent an understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions towards an educational philosophy and process. The design is interpretative, constructive and descriptive. It has as its overarching theoretical framework an appreciation of how individuals and contexts are inextricably linked in dynamic processes which make multiple constructions of reality necessary manifestations of human cognition (Dawes & Donald, 2000:5).

- Qualitative

A qualitative research design is seen as integral to this study as the research problem has sought to gain a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the constructions held by particular individuals towards a process of educational reform within a transforming society. The emphasis has thus been placed on how individuals interpret their worlds through their words and actions and how

this research process could most accurately reflect the complexity of these interpretations, "... qualitative research attempts to capture what people say and do, that is the products of how they interpret the world" (Maykut & Morehouse,1994:18).

- Interpretive and constructive

The design is considered to be interpretative and constructive as it views reality as being "..socially constructed by people active in the research process.." , that realities are multiple and that they are context and time dependent (Merriam, 1998:4;Mertens, 1998:11 &161). It attempts to understand the research question from the perspective of the participants (Mertens, 1998:6) but also acknowledges that the researcher as instrument is not value free and that the researcher's own frame of references form part of the research product.

An interpretative and constructive philosophy informed both the choice of method of primary data collection (interactive focus group discussions) and the interpretation of the responses of the research participants. The categories which emerged from the data were reflective of the concepts which were of importance to and constructed by the participants and were not guided or informed by a priori assumptions from the researcher (Mertens, 1998:13).

- Descriptive

The research design is descriptive as it has used words as data and in order to describe the process, convey the meanings and develop an in-depth understanding of the constructed realities and observed worlds of both participants and researcher. Strauss & Corbin (1990:22) view a skilled researcher as a person who " ...becomes adept at weaving descriptions, speaker's words, field note quotations and their own interpretations into a rich and believable descriptive narrative".

## 3.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.4.1 Participants

The study group was drawn from the parent body of a government school which is situated in a middle to upper socio-economic area in Cape Town. This school has included learners with Down Syndrome over a period of six years and has recently included learners with differently described disabilities. The school is well-resourced and its constituent parent body are generally considered economically advantaged within the current South African economy.

The sampling process was purposeful in that parents were selected on the basis that a relatively small sample of individuals could provide in depth information regarding the research question (Maykut & Morehouse,1994:45; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997:397). The rationale behind the selection of participants in this study was influenced firstly by the logistics of the current placements of learners with disabilities within various school grades and secondly by the possible variation of responses that different time exposures to inclusive education could provide. The parents who were invited to join the first focus group discussion were parents of learners who had been in inclusive classes for three or more years and who were in the last year of the intermediate phase of their primary schooling. The parents who were invited to join the second focus group discussion were parents of learners who had been in an inclusive classroom for at least one year and who were in the last year of the foundation phase of their primary schooling.

The sampling process comprised various stages of selection, the initial stages being dictated by the nature of the research question and the final stage being

subject to the willingness or ability of the targeted parents to attend the discussion groups.

The initial stage involved the targeting of pre-existing groups of parents as described above. The second stage was to access the parents in the designated classes through a written invitation to join a focus group discussion at the school. (see Appendix B). The final stage of the process involved attendance at the focus group discussion. Even though twelve and fourteen parents of each targeted grade were invited to join the respective focus group discussions, each focus group ultimately consisted of three participants.

The focus group for the Grade 6 parents was conducted in the evening and the focus group for the Grade 3 parents was conducted in the afternoon. On both occasions only female participants attended the group discussions.

### 3.4.2 Researcher as Instrument

In a qualitative research design the researcher is considered as pivotal to the process of both data collection and analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985: 39-40) view this human instrument as the only instrument which is capable of understanding and adapting to a "variety of realities", including the value-based and context bound realities, and assert that non-human instruments actually impede the process of mutual shaping of reality that qualitative research is designed to capture.

Recent literature has encouraged the research process to be less secretive, more participatory and revealing and thus more open to general scrutiny and debate.

> "For the researcher, recognising oneself as a learner, cultivating a sense of humility in the light of the richness and profundity of the human subject and one's own limited skills and understandings, appreciating that one's

work is never final or beyond criticism and thus always partial and incomplete, are crucial elements of the critical self-awareness that is being advocated" (Barton, 1998:31).

As researcher I have had to acknowledge and recognize my own biases and attempt to fulfil my intent to be constructive and allow for possibilities and alternatives to inform my interpretation of words, gestures, pauses and situations. This process, sometimes referred to as "Epoche" (Katz as quoted in Maykut & Morehouse:123), has demanded an ongoing questioning and open interaction with the data so that concepts can be uncovered and theories constructed (Mertens,1998: 171).

Being the research instrument therefore involves being aware of the predominantly subjective nature of this kind of inquiry and a personal ability to respond to a variety of reality constructions. I have only recently become aware of theories regarding the social construction of knowledge and feel that I have to continually train myself to become more constructivist in my outlook and in my teaching practice. I was trained in learning support at a time when the medical model of disability and learning differences was routinely advocated as a means of reducing perceived deficiencies in learners into discrete hierarchies of measurable sub-skills and consequent skill training. Much of this training and practice has become reflexive and often represents my initial reactions to challenges which occur both my personal life and my professional practice. I therefore have to make conscious attempts to reframe my perceptions into broader, more contextually based and dynamic constructions of reality.

This research process has provided me with abundant practice in this double take on reality! I trust, however, that my present reflective approaches have been beneficial in this research process as they have allowed me to become aware of the kind of dilemmas to which minds, which have been trained in a certain way, have had to adapt to enable a more flexible interpretation of current

social and educational processes. The ability to key into differing reality constructions has also be facilitated by having recourse to shared reference points regarding social, cultural and education life experiences and a related source of consensual language forms (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:71).

Many current researchers view science in the postmodern world as being an important social process which can yield different kinds of knowledge. These new insights are seen to be crucial in enriching the current knowledge economy as they allow for paradigmatic shifts and the kind of disruption in previously established and rule bound procedures that allows for a growth in knowledge and related progress as byproducts of change. "Knowledge ..... develops through a process of paradigm crisis and replacement, a social discursive process of knowledge construction, deconstruction and reconstruction, the key elements of which are voice, (perspective), collaboration, and-above all- inclusion" (Skrtic, Sailor & Gee, 1996:143).

### 3.4.3 Methods of Data Collection

Data was obtained through various methods. These consisted of a review of the literature (as discussed in Chapter 2), interviews with the parents of two learners with disabilities, two focus group discussions with parents of learners without disabilities, written responses to the research problem, field notes and individual telephonic interviews with the focus group participants.

#### 3.4.3.1 Interviews with the Parents of Learners with Disabilities

These individual and semi-structured interviews were conducted after receiving permission to proceed with the research from the Western Cape Education Department and prior to any other data collection. Consultation with these two parents was considered extremely important in the light of making certain that the research would cause no harm to any person and to allow these parents to

question and probe any aspect of the intended research procedure (see ethical considerations: 3.6).

The parents expressed great interest in the intended research and felt that it was an extremely important area of investigation. Even though the parents felt that it was the right of their child to attend the neighbourhood school and that inclusion was a philosophy regarding life rather than merely schooling, they were concerned as to whether parents of learners without disabilities might feel that their children were being disadvantaged by having a learner with disabilities in their classrooms. These parents also felt that inclusive education had been challenging and that there had been a steep learning curve for both teachers and parents at the beginning of the process. The parents were also very appreciative of the efforts of all the teachers who had been involved with their children and felt that they had not only been very eager to learn from situations which were often unpredictable, but that they had managed to adapt their teaching styles and classroom arrangements to accommodate learners with disabilities. The parents felt that their primary goal for including their children was for the purposes of socialization rather than educational instruction. They also felt that the school community had benefited greatly from having their children in the school and that their children were accepted within the larger community as well.

#### 3.4.3.2 Focus Group Discussions

The research format which constituted the bulk of the collected data were two self-contained focus groups. Morgan (1997: 20) views this method of data collection as being particularly suited to learning "...about participants' experiences and perspectives..." and also that an open ended question which asks for experiences often "..produces a livelier group dynamic – people are more than happy to compare their different experiences, whereas they might be reluctant to challenge someone else's opinion".

Even though texts on focus groups advise that groups should ideally consist of between six and eight participants, there are reported advantages to running small group discussions. Morgan (1995:42) considers small focus groups to be advantageous when participants are "...likely to be interested in the topic and respectful of each other". As the final sample of each group of parents was dependent on their choice to attend a group discussion, it seems reasonable to assume that each participant was interested enough in the topic to make the necessary arrangements to attend the group. Small groups also allow more time for each participant to react to a topic and thus give a clearer indication to the researcher of each participants views (Morgan, 1995:42).

Despite the assertion of Bloor et al (2001:39) that there "... is no such thing as a neutral venue for a focus group...", the venues which were chosen were sufficiently neutral to allow each participant to feel comfortable about expressing their views and relating their experiences (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:45). The groups were conducted in small conference rooms which the school provided. No school staff members were present and the respective settings providing enough formality to furnish participants with subtle contextual reminders which allowed them to focus their attention on the research question.

### 3.4.3.3 Semi Structured Questionnaires

The focus group discussions were preceded by the completion of a semi-structured questionnaire which asked participants to fill in details regarding the number of years their child had been in an inclusive classroom, and to give a brief description of their background and community. All the participants described themselves as coming from middle to high socio-economic environments and as having tertiary educational qualifications. The second part of the questionnaire asked for a written response to the research question, "What are your experiences of inclusive education?". The purpose of this initial exercise was two-fold. On the one hand it provided information concerning each

participant and their perceptions of their contexts and experiences of inclusive education and on the other hand it allowed time for personal reflection uncontaminated by group dynamics.

#### 3.4.3.4 Follow-Up Telephone Interviews

These interviews were conducted a month after each focus group discussion. Each participant was telephoned and asked whether there was any other information which, on reflection, had come to mind which could contribute to the collected data concerning experiences of inclusive education. The themes which were emerging from the data analysis were then communicated to each parent and comments were elicited regarding whether they considered that these themes accurately represented the details of the discussions as they remembered them. Additional comments were added to the data collection.

#### 3.4.3.5 Field Notes

Field notes concerning observations made during interviews and focus group discussions were recorded. These related largely to the manner of the interactions between participants in the focus group discussions and the tone of voice and responses of parents during the telephonic interviews. This information was added to the data bank to be analysed.

### 3.4.4 Research Procedure

As mentioned previously, permission to proceed with the research was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department. Prior to arranging for the focus group discussions at the school, interviews were conducted with the parents of two of the included learners with Down Syndrome. These interviews were undertaken in order to discuss the purpose and design of the study, to probe whether these parents haboured any reservations regarding the nature of the

research question and related data gathering techniques, and to obtain their permission to proceed with the study. Data gathered during these interviews provided additional contextual information and personal experiences relating to the inclusion of their children.

The participants in the focus group were initially briefed as to the purpose of the research (to gain better insight into parental experiences and perceptions of inclusive education),and were individually asked for permission to audiotape the group proceedings and to telephone them at a subsequent date. The parents were assured of the confidentiality of the data, in that names or other information which could be personally identifying, would not be revealed.

Before the discussion proceeded, each participant was asked to fill in the semi-structured questionnaire.

The focus group discussions proceeded quite naturally and interactively without the need for many prompts. The prompts which were provided related to reflecting back issues which had been raised by the participants and referring to official policy documents with regard to the implementation of inclusive education, the view of parents as partners and various issues within the school context. The discussions lasted for 65 minutes and 90 minutes respectively.

### 3.4.5 Methods of Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is achieved through a combination of "...description and analysis – an analysis that uses concepts from the theoretical framework of the study" (Mertens, 1998:10).

Lincoln and Guba (1985:332) refer to the conventional dictionary definitions of data or the grammatically neutral Latin past participle "datum" as being conceptualised by individuals whose positivist philosophy determines that they

view that data is "given" by nature. However they pertinently point out that this past participle is actually derived from the more active verb 'dare' which means 'to give'. They go on to say that "...data are, so to speak the *constructions* offered by or in the sources; data analysis leads to a *reconstruction* of those constructions".

The data on the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and two copies were made of each transcription. Written responses as well as field notes and telephonic interview details were also copied and added to the existing data bank. This procedure was done to enable the disciplined analysis of the data using the Constant Comparative Method as elucidated by Maykut and Morehouse,(1994: 126-149).

This process is initiated by a rereading of the transcripts and other written information. Thereafter a process of 'discovery' enabled the recognition of emerging themes which represented recurring phenomena within the data and provided an initial framework for further and more refined inductive data analysis.

The process proceeded with an identification of units of meaning within all pieces of information within the data. These data fragments were then cut from the transcript and taped onto cards. Categories with accompanying rules of inclusion were then formed, refined, adapted and enlarged as each unit of meaning was compared to all other units of meaning. To enable an overview and holistic picture of the data and the emerging categories the data cards were visually grouped together on large pieces of paper on which the category was written. Continual self-questioning was used to tease out the concepts that the participants used "...to capture what they say or do..." (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:133) and data analysis was discussed and negotiated with a co-researcher.

As the research design was dependent on an awareness of the relative influences of both broader and more immediate contextual variables, both the

reporting and the discussion of the results have been framed into systems which allow for a progressively more focused analysis of responses pertaining to the research question.

## 3.5 DATA VERIFICATION

Data verification in qualitative research involves establishing the trustworthiness of the data in terms of its credibility, its transferability, its dependability and its confirmability ( Lincoln & Guba, 1885: 289-331; Mertens, 1998:181).

### 3.5.1 Credibility

Credibility (or validity) means the truthfulness or 'believability' (Merriam, 1998:64) of the study or the extent to which there is a correspondence between the way the participants perceive the social constructs under investigation and the manner in which the researcher gives an accurate account of these perceptions (Mertens, 1998:181; Silverman,2000:175). In this study the credibility of the research findings was established by using the following procedures: multiple data sources, triangulation, mechanically recorded data, member checks, the use of an independent researcher and participants' language. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:289-331; McMillan &Schumacher, 1997: 405; Mertens,1998:181;).

The **multiple data sources** involved a literature review, written responses from the participants, focus group interviews, individual telephonic interviews and contextual information provided by staff members at the school and the parents of children with disabilities. This combination of different means of looking at the research focus enabled triangulation which can be described as a convergence or consistency of evidence from different sources of data (Mertens, 1998:183). The focus group data, which formed the bulk of the data collected, was **audiotaped** and transcribed verbatim. Individual telephonic interviews which were conducted a month after the focus group interviews, not only enabled some

reflective additions to the data base, but also provided an opportunity to **check** the emerging criteria with the participants.

The categories which emerged from the constant comparative method of data analysis were discussed with an **independent researcher** who acted as a peer debriefer by questioning the unitising of the data fragments and the writing of the rules of inclusion for the emerging categories (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:126-149).

In the presentation of the results the **actual language** used by the participants was provided to balance the more abstract analytical process with the raw data which provided the material for the analysis and synthesis of the information.

### 3.5.2 Transferability

This is described as being the degree to which the research design is adequately described so that the findings can be extended to similar contexts and situations (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997:411; Mertens, 1998:183). In this study details regarding the school situation, the role of the headmaster, the cultural expectations and backgrounds of the participating parents and their socio-economic contexts are described. "Extensive and careful description of the time, place, context and culture is known as 'thick descriptions'" (Mertens, 1998:183) Due consideration was however given to the extent to which these descriptions could betray the anonymity of the particular school and the impact that the situational descriptions could have on the ethical considerations pertaining to this study.

### 3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability parallels the concept of reliability in quantitative research in that it represents the extent to which the process of the research can be formally

tracked and inspected (Mertens, 1998:184). This involves what has been termed an audit trail, the purpose of which is to provide a detailed protocol of the particular research process so that other researchers can replicate the study. In this study a detailed description of the research process has been provided and the data which has been collected has been preserved in its original form. This data comprises the audiotapes, verbatim transcriptions, written responses, field notes and the evidence of the constant comparative coding process which informed the data presentation and analysis. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994:146) the above information "...allows you to walk people through your work, from beginning to end, so that they can understand the path you took and judge the trustworthiness of your outcomes".

### 3.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is the qualitative equal to objectivity in quantitative methods. It is seen to be the extent to which the data has been accurately represented and the influence of the researcher's personal judgement minimized. It is enhanced by the preceding criteria of trustworthiness in that they combine to establish the confirmability of findings by verifying the accurate and monitored portrayal of the research process. Mertens (1998:184) describes confirmability as the ability of a researcher to explain the logic which informed the data analysis and an explanation of how the data can be traced to its sources. In this study the theoretical framework which has informed the data portrayal and analysis has been made explicit together with the links between the portrayed data and the discussion and conclusions.

## 3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Merriam (1998:217), the kind of ethical dilemmas which are likely to be of concern in qualitative research are usually related to two processes in the research procedure, namely data collection and the dissemination of findings. Both these processes have to do with people and types of relationships and involve issues of trust and responsibility towards the research participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997:418; Silverman, 2000:200).

Many recent texts on research methods consider the major ethical issues which need to be confronted in qualitative research as being those of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, voluntary participation, freedom from harm and feedback (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997418-421; Merriam, 1998 216-219; Mertens, 1998 275-281).

- Informed consent

Permission was granted from the Western Cape Education Department for the study to proceed within a school in its area of jurisdiction (see Appendix A) . The issue of informed consent was initially addressed in the letter which invited parents to join the focus group discussions (see Appendix B). The purpose of the research was clearly indicated, together with the primary form of data collection as well as the place of the intended study in a broader and more comprehensive research project.

The issue of informed consent was revisited at the focus group meetings where the purpose of the research was restated. Verbal permission was obtained from each participant for the audiotaping of the data.

- Confidentiality and anonymity

The participants in the focus group discussions were also assured that their confidentiality would be respected in that their names would not be used in any part of the research process. The confidentiality of the research site was less easy to assure, however, as not many schools openly practise inclusion.

- Voluntary participation

The process which led to the participation in the focus group discussions enabled parents to make choices as to whether to respond to the letter of invitation and subsequently whether to attend the discussions. Participation was thus entirely voluntary as there was no coercion placed on the parents to attend.

- Freedom from harm

The individuals which could potentially be harmed by this research process were considered to be the parents of the children with disabilities. It was considered that a discussion amongst parents of children without disabilities might make them feel ostrasized or uncomfortable about a process to which they had no direct access. Lengthy face to face interviews were thus held with two parents of children with disabilities and they both conveyed the assurance that they were comfortable with the focus of the research, the methods of data collection and the proposed dissemination of the findings.

- Feedback

Feedback regarding the emerging data categorization was communicated to the participating parents in the telephonic interviews and as part of a process of member checking. Ongoing communication between the researcher, the

principal and a teacher at the school has allowed for some preliminary feedback. A more formal feedback discussion has been offered to these two parties at the conclusion of the study. The parents of the children with disabilities will also be informed of the general outcomes of the study without revealing particular viewpoints which could be ascribed to known individual parents.

## 3.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the research process which has attempted to provide the best possible means of eliciting information and clarity of shared reality constructions regarding the research question. Specific reference has been made to the particular qualitative methods which were employed in this study, as well as the major concerns of any research which are the extent to which the process and the results of the study are trustworthy and ethical.

# CHAPTER 4 - DISPLAY AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reveals a presentation and interpretation of the results obtained from the research process. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the results which have emerged from an inductive approach to data analysis and to generate links to broader political, social, cultural and economic contexts, I have framed the emerging categories into macro, exo/meso and micro systems, the contents of which range from broader policy related issues to more individual and personal concerns.

## 4.2 DISPLAY OF THE RESULTS

### 4.2.1 Responses to the Macro Contextual Issues

#### 4.2.1.1 Awareness of a Changing World

The parents of the older group of learners expressed an awareness of the fact that they needed to prepare their children for a changing world, far removed from their own experiences or direct control. Inclusive education was seen to be a useful part of this process which to some parents is linked to the opening up of schools to all races "..because I feel that it is important that she must mix with people of different colour or...whatever".

#### 4.2.1.2 Problems with Defining Disability

A broader issue which also generated debate was how disability is defined, who makes judgement calls concerning who is disabled and whether government

policy actually has defined disability " That is a debate in terms of where in the policy (how) do they define disabled".

### 4.2.2 Responses to the Exo/Meso Contextual Issues:

#### 4.2.2.1 The South African Educational System

Many of the data fragments which were culled from the transcripts related to whether the educational system was ready to deal with the practical issues that "sweeping policy statements" would generate in the classroom. There was a strong feeling that there was a chasm between theory and practice and that many policy and related curriculum changes were predicated on smaller class sizes than is currently the norm in South African public schools and that this further emphasized the contradictory status of policy statements being in touch with day to day practice.

> " How it (inclusive education) is combined with mainstream education for me becomes the challenge. I don't believe it is fair to any of those three interest groups, the teaching staff, the disabled children and the children who fit into that band of being considered normal. I think the system fails all three of them by looking at the system the way it is now being designed traditionally to serve the needs of particular children and now you push those parametres at access level without looking at the present practices."

A further response to the educational system was that it actually penalised people who could afford to provide extra educational resources to their children and that the whole educational system was failing precisely because it relied on these kind of inputs to make some sectors of education successful.

#### 4.2.2.2 The Community

This particular school is seen by the parents as being a school which serves the immediate community: " we are slap bang in the middle of suburbia". The parents described themselves as coming from conservative, upper middle class and traditional environments. Most of the parents feel secure sending their children to this primary school as it is seen to have a good 'name', be well resourced and as reflecting the goals, values and the "implicit rule system" which allowed them, as parents, to be effective partners in their children's education. The prospect of high school education however was an emotive issue for the parents of the older children as they felt that the community at this level became fractured, that the majority of parents sent their children out of the area for high schooling, and that no comparable facility was available to them at close proximity.

#### 4.2.2.3 The School Situation

The parents felt that the school valued academic outcomes and that there are high expectations regarding academically related outcomes from both the school personnel and the parents. " I think that there is a curriculum and there are expectations around what children reach and where they get to". However most of the parents felt that the school had managed to balance the needs of the children with disabilities with the needs of the majority learner population. However the extent to which the whole process of including learners with disabilities was being monitored was of concern together with the extent to which ongoing questioning was informing their decision making. " ...in terms of how they are looking at how it is working? What's not working. I don't know how they are asking those questions. I would like to believe that they are asking themselves these questions".

#### 4.2.2.4 Eligibility

The thorny problem of the accessibility of learners with disabilities to the school was an area of concern and considerable difficulty for the participating parents. One of the parents felt that accessibility could be conditional on an assessment yardstick such as an intelligence test to gauge the extent to which the prospective learner was educable. Language which reflected this quantitative feeling included words such as "low functioning, criteria, assess, borderline, standards, varying levels, proportion". Another parent felt that there should be no more that one learner with a disability per class and there was general consensus that the proportion of learners with disabilities should reflect the same proportion of people with disabilities in the local community. Again the problem of a definition of disability was expressed:

> " ...if you look at it across a band and say there are children with this and with that...again access would become... it would become problematic...because now...who do you include and who do you not....".

It was also conceded that the school would not be overwhelmed with children with disabilities and that some parents would choose to send their children to special schools.

Age related issues provoked much discussion particularly amongst the parents who had experienced inclusive education for a longer time. On the one hand of the continuum it was felt that ideally inclusion should occur as soon as possible in the pre-school years. The benefits of this practice were seen not only to be reinforcing the idea that children of a certain age belong together, but also related to the perception that a more informal atmosphere allowed the parents to interact more with the child with a disability and thereby come to feel more comfortable with this experience of difference. For the children it was seen to be accepted that whoever had been included would progress, grow and move through the system with his or her peers. However the parents of the older group of learners expressed the feeling that their experience of the included

learner in their children's' class was that a certain ceiling was reached beyond which the learner did not show much progress. This progress related to the ability to manage the normative work in the standard and the ability to maintain the intensity of early friendships. There was also a realization that much of this was due to the fact that most of the age peers were entering puberty where difference is seen to be threatening and were conformity to implicit group identity rules were paramount. There was a feeling that if learners at the high school had not themselves experienced inclusion that they would tend to be cruel, demeaning and subject learners with disabilities to taunts and that it was important for included learners to move and grow with a group. There was a tension between expressing these thoughts and knowledge of individual learners and what would happen to them should they join a special school environment and loose contact with all the benefits of a more 'normalised' environment.

#### 4.2.2.5 Teacher Capacity

Much of the data generated from the focus group discussions related to concerns regarding the teacher's capacity to manage change and the feeling that it is the teacher who actually has to make any policy directive and related changes work " ... the core people are the teachers essentially you know at the end of the day the weight of the responsibility will fall upon their shoulders". There was considerable admiration for the work that the teachers are doing but also an acute awareness of the pressures of increased class sizes together with new curriculum directions and the ability to provide quality education to learners of disparate needs and abilities. Doubt was expressed as to whether teachers had received sufficient training to deal with learners with disabilities. However, it was also felt that teachers had learnt through their first-hand experiences and although this had been a sharp "learning curve" that there was considerable support amongst the community of teachers.

One participant felt that teachers did not have enough "voice" and that political correctness impeded a true expression of their feelings and their ability to contribute to any debate around policy changes. All participants felt that the teachers should receive more support and that the ideal would be to have a teacher-aide in the classroom to provide at least "another pair of hands".

4.2.2.6 Classroom Management and Quality of Learning

Many of the doubts concerning the practice of inclusive education were focused on not knowing what is actually occurring in the classroom. Several of the participating parents verbalised the concern saying that they are not there to witness what is happening, " the difficulty for me is that we as parents are not there (in the classroom) to actually see it happening. The problem I would have you know the child in our class... I mean is this taking away from the academic side..." ; " You know as a parent....if I was like a witness in the classroom and I could see, hey, he is not so different, then my mind would be at rest". This concern was also related to class size, the perception that the so-called normalised class situation was already under stress and the perceived greater possibility that children with less visible learning challenges who were in need of extra help would be more easily overlooked.

The quality of learning happening in the classroom was also discussed, especially in relation to the quality of learning which the learners with disabilities were receiving in the classroom. The extent to which the school system had changed to adapt to these varying needs was also questioned.

A related issue which was evident in the parents' discussions was the fact that it was known that the learners with disabilities did different work from that of the class,

" there are certainly stories that come around that it is encoded in the classroom that the child doesn't really do the same work..."; " ...and they don't do tests as

far as I know... They colour in and they actually get told to focus on something else. That is the impression I have got.....". It was also apparent to the parents that the learners with disabilities were often removed from the classroom to receive either extra help in basic skills or do errands or take time out either individually or in the company of a child chosen by the teacher. There was also a perception amongst the parents whose children are currently in Grade 6 that most of the work being done in the class was "beyond" the capabilities of the learner with a disability in the class.

#### 4.2.2.7 The School's Communication with Parents

A feature which emerged during discussion and which has implications for school policy on the one hand and the way in which their children reported difference if at all to their parents on the other hand was the fact that parents were not told that there was a learner with a disability in the class. "It was only through conversation that by the way I knew that there was this boy in the classroom who was Down Syndrome". The parents in the one focus group all agreed that if they had been told, they would not have asked for their children to be moved to another class. However, one parent felt that it was important that the learners should be prepared for a child who was different. She suggested that someone, not necessarily the teacher, should discuss this fact with the class so that the children would not be alarmed by different behaviours and that the parents could provide backup explanations when questions arose at home. The parents felt that termly Grade meetings in which various topics were addressed would be most useful to prepare parents to better partner the education system and their individual children.

#### 4.2.2.8 The Role of the Head of the School

The headmaster of the school was seen as pivotal to the implementation of inclusion at the school. Most of the parents felt that he had taken the initiative and that this 'bold step' was indicative of the faith he had in his staff. It was interesting to note that most parents felt that too much reference to literature about the topic would not really aid in initial decision making and that "you just have to jump in the deep end...". The headmaster was also seen to be in touch with all the learners, supportive to his staff and available to parents should they ask for a consultation.

### 4.2.3 Responses to the Micro Contextual Issues

#### 4.2.3.1 Socialization Benefits

All of the participating parents felt that the benefit which led them to believe that the experience of inclusive education was more positive than negative was the opportunity it was affording their children of experiencing difference first-hand, feeling comfortable in accepting people with disabilities in general and that this exposure was enabling their children to see beyond the outward disability.

> "Here they are being at close quarters with them and they are given to realise that everybody has a personality and everybody has their own contribution to give and I think that they have learned so much more...understanding ...they understand each other and realise that there is more to somebody who is disabled than the fact that they just are."

Socialising with peers of different abilities was also seen as a privilege which would afford children greater interpersonal coping skills in that they could "work out that everybody in the world out there is actually not the same as them and they have to learn to actually adjust to all that".

The benefit of being in a normalised environment was also seen to be essential to the development and acceptance of the learner with a disability. "...how the child (with disabilities) becomes more socialised and just starts behaving like normal children because often they haven't been exposed to a normal situation and then they behave like mentally retarded children and once they start mixing with the normal children they really pick up the habits of normal children and start behaving far more sociably".

There was also a perception that it was important to share in the success of the learner with a disability in reaching various personal milestones and that this served to foster understanding, tolerance and in fact a celebration of difference.

4.2.3.2 Helper/Helpee Relationship

Concurrent with this perception of the benefit of socialising with people with disabilities was the perception that the learners without disabilities often fulfilled a role of helper with respect to the learner with a disability. This view was particularly evident amongst the parents of the girl learners who felt that their children often adopted a mothering role in relation to the learner with a disability. There was some disquiet expressed about a school practice of having monitors to take responsibility for a learner with a disability during break and sport periods and whether children of a relatively young age should have this kind of responsibility fostered upon them. It was also expressed that this practice on the one hand had the potential to undermine rather than advance the self-esteem of both parties, but on the other hand could become part of an interesting teaching and learning situation.

#### 4.2.3.3 Fear of the Unknown

A strong feeling which emerged amongst the participating parents was that most adults of their generation had not had any experience of interacting with people with disabilities themselves and that it was the fear of the unknown that often framed their initial perceptions and reactions to disability in general. "if you.... haven't been exposed to mentally handicapped children ...you're afraid of them, you don't want to interact with them and you hang back and it's just an uncomfortable situation.. ". There was a feeling of regret that they had not be advantaged to the extent that their own children were currently being advantaged, and that exposure to difference would have helped them to cope better with their own challenges, "I think that if I had been exposed to people with disabilities when I was at school it would have helped me to deal with what I am sitting with now". It was also felt that many parents' preconceived ideas concerning difference were changing and that the whole school community had been 'touched' by including learners with disabilities.

#### 4.2.3.4 Not to the Detriment of Others

A more negative but candid theme which emerged was the belief that inclusive education was fine as long as it did not affect the parents' own children's academic progress, "his academics must not be compromised in any way" , "not to the detriment of my own child". This feeling relates to the parents' overall desire to provide their children with the kind of academic grounding which this particular school is considered well equipped to provide. This more narrow focus was evident both in the younger childrens' parents as there was a fear that the acquisition of basic skills could be compromised, as well as the older children's parents as their concern were more projected towards providing a base for a successful academic high school career for their children.

#### 4.2.3.5 Focus on Behaviour

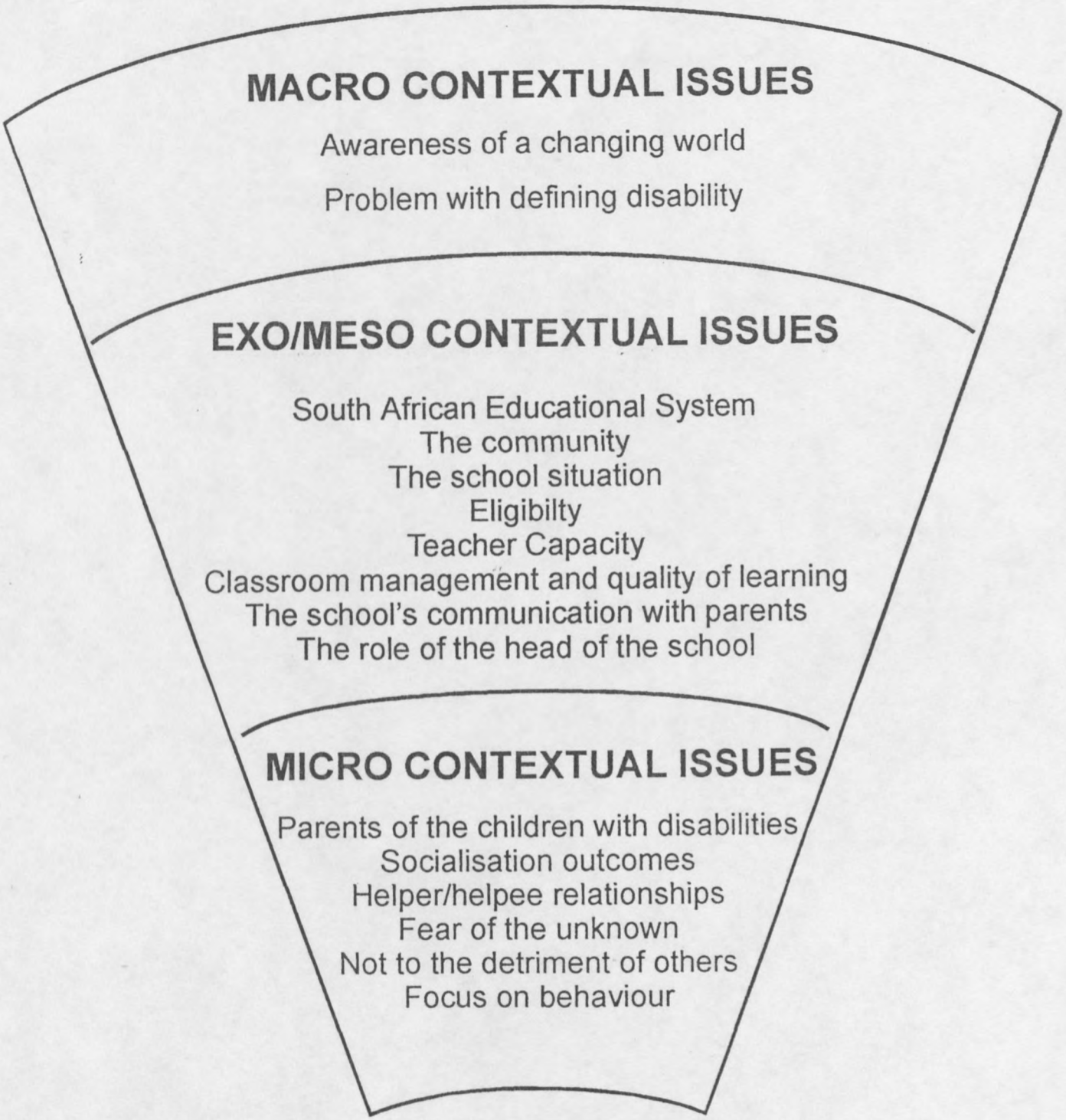
The concerns of the participating parents with regard to inclusive education were largely related to the behavioural aspects of learners experiencing various challenges rather than a physical or intellectual difference. Both focus group discussions digressed towards a discussion of how learners with variously described behavioural problems were often more problematic and consequently often captured more of the teacher's time than learners with other disabilities.
"My son comes home and there is another child in the class and he talks about that child more.....he says that the teacher spoke to so-and-so today and he's so naughty and it is not actually the Down Syndrome child..."

#### 4.2.3.6 Parents of the Children with Disabilities

The feelings expressed towards the parents of the children with disabilities were unanimously positive. The participating parents expressed great admiration for these parents, expressed the sentiment that they would also strive to provide the best kind of education should their child be considered disabled and were aware of how well informed the parents of learners with disabilities were in respect of their children's potential and their right to be in the neighbourhood school.

The following diagram presents an overview of the results. It is represented as a pie slice in order to emphasize that this research study represents the results of a group of parents from a sub population of a larger possible population of parents whose children are within inclusive settings.

# GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS



## 4.3 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### 4.3.1 Introduction

In the following discussion of the results of this research process I will attempt, through the use of language, to gain and reflect a holistic perspective of the interplay between the individual and group responses to the research question and broader contextual issues. The challenge will be to remain as faithful as possible to the views, concerns and experiences of the research participants while uncovering mutually constructed realities within a particular context.

### 4.3.2 Focus Group Benefits

The most fascinating positive result of the focus group discussions was to evidence the value of providing parents with a forum to talk through a variety of related issues which affect their lives and the lives of their children. This kind of interactive exploration of experiences, feelings and perceptions, and the often moral dilemmas which they provoke, was extremely revealing of the struggles which parents continually engage in when balancing a perception of the common good as opposed to their particular interest in providing the best for their own children.

This experience bears out the assertion of David Morgan who says that focus groups "reveal aspects of experiences and perspectives that would be not as accessible without group interaction" (1997:20) The small group discussion also enabled each participant to explore and provide stimuli for responses which continually provided a platform for the uncovering of the kind of "normative assumptions" (Bloor et al, 2001:5) which may have remained unarticulated in individual interviews. The group discussion also mirrored the kind of democratic

and participative process which recent education policy is advocating and allowed for a less intrusive and controlling influence from the researcher.

It was interesting to note that the parent who initially seemed to be expressing the most critical views appeared to benefit most from the process. It was evident that this opportunity was cathartic for her in that her views and assertions became more moderate, positive and empathic both during the process of her own sometimes-lengthy responses and as the group discussion proceeded.

Even though there was an awareness of a broader picture in terms of the rapidly changing and consequently less predictable world and how the South African education system is having to adapt to addressing urgent needs, it was the more immediate day to day concerns which generated the most discussion.

### 4.3.3 The Macro Contextual Issues

#### 4.3.3.1 Awareness of a Changing World

The parents who had older children were generally more aware of the impact that more equitable and competitive labour markets would have on the ability of their children to advance in the world. It was interesting to witness the way in which the parents who have received schooling in this country seem to be filtering the process of integration. It appears that a perceived dilution of previously described homogenous groups of learners is allowing parents to move away from socially engineered descriptions of reality to a more informed and personally mediated experience of reality. This has consequently allowed them to view exposure to and experience of difference as not only being desirable but as being a more realistic sample of that less certain and knowable world "out there" (Balboni & Pedrabissi, 2000:158).

#### 4.3.3.2 Problems with Defining Disability

The debate around who defines disability was a source of unease and obscurity to the participants. Part of this difficulty was attributable to an uncertain reference to a residue of reductionistic terms, an expression of otherness often highlighted by repeated use of pronouns "they" and "them" and the abiding perception that disability is not only externally quantifiable but that it is resident within individuals. Poplin (1988a: 401) refers to how difficult and unsettling it is to reflect paradigmatic change as we have " ....learned well the old ways of seeing and now find ourselves challenged by new definitions of phenomena we once thought we understood.....". It seems as if many adults, especially in the current South African political context, are indeed aware of a need to change while concurrently finding it difficult to name and give a new and assertive language to more constructivistic ways of seeing.

It was also interesting to witness that there was a tendency to equate differences in ethnic origin with differences in ability, this possibly being an unintended consequence of concurrent inclusion of learners of different races and learners with disabilities. In a sense this somewhat unfortunate predilection allows for an easier shift in viewing the disability issue as an equal opportunity issue but also has the more sinister potential, in the minds of some adults, of perpetuating racial stigmatization.

In the light of different interpretations of the above connection it is interesting to note that inclusionists in America actually used a judgement which declared that racially segregated school were unconstitutional in attempts to charge that special educational placements were equally unequal, stigmatising and reinforcing of views of inferiority (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994/1995:24). Many of the more vociferous advocates of inclusion have also equated special education as the moral equivalent of apartheid (Lipsky & Gartner 1987).

### 4.3.4 Exo/Meso Contextual Issues

#### 4.3.4.1 The South African Educational System

The criticism directed towards the South African Education system reflected a feeling that a top-down approach to policy changes still exists in that not enough attention had been given to guiding the implementation of change (Christie, 1999:166). There was a perception that changes were often only happening at the level of access to schools without accompanying change in restructuring of the practice of education to accommodate different needs.

There was a strong feeling that the educational system was only working where parents were financially able to dampen the effects of increasing class size and to provide the kinds of supports needed to implement inclusive education. This current situation is seen to be merely perpetuating the unequal delivery of education where many parents have no choices and other parents are financial rescuers of educational endeavours in pockets of relative affluence, rather than being part of a greater collaborative educational enrichment for all learners.

It can be argued that the ability of parents to provide additional financial support to their local schools allows administrators, teachers and parents to manage and control change in ways which largely retain the kinds of educational provision designed for more homogeneously conceptualised learners rather than change systems to reflect, capitalise upon and celebrate difference.

#### 4.3.4.2 The Community

The community in which this school is situated reflects a sense of stable and predictable lifestyles in which traditional relationships between parents and their children are valued and perpetuated. The school offers extensive extra mural

activities and day long care and their technological facilities have kept pace with advances which the learners are most likely to have discussed, if not had access to, in their homes.

One of the patterns which research into school and home partnerships has revealed is that affluent communities ".. have more positive family involvement, on average.." and that schools in "...more economically depressed communities make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having" (Epstein, 1995:703). It seems therefore that more economically advantaged communities have more opportunities to feel welcomed and affirmed in their relationships with schooling. This resonance between home and school reflects a more equal relationship between parents and staff personnel in which contact between parties can be underscored by reciprocal relationships and understanding. Due cognizance to the disparate economic and educational situations of parents in South Africa however makes this particular situation a rarity and an ideal towards which the educational system can aspire but not expect.

It appears that a sense of community reflected in common aspirations, values and reciprocal interactions within a learner's various learning situations is the most enabling environment for learners of all abilities and that the ideals of inclusive education are more easily accommodated within settled and supportive communities. In this respect it is interesting to note the research of Balboni and Pedrabissi (2000:148) which found that the parents who were most favourable towards inclusive education were mothers and parents with average-to-high average socio-economic status.

4.3.4.3 Perceptions of the School

Consistent with the high academic aspirations which the parents have for their children was their need to know whether the school personnel were monitoring

and refining the effectiveness of the inclusion programme at the school. This need to know about processes within the school also reflected the feeling that these parents consider themselves to be consumers of a model of education the details of which are important to monitor and control (Vincent, 1996: 52).

#### 4.3.4.4 Eligibility

The issue of which learners with disabilities would be eligible to be included in the school reflected very starkly the legacy regarding constructions of social order which previous control over school entry has imprinted in many adults.

The process which the focus group discussion enabled with regard to this issue was extremely interesting. Responses to individual feelings about access to the school allowed the group to both vocalize their fears concerning being overwhelmed by a process which was considered necessary to control, as well as relinquish control to reasoned debate that an overrepresentation of learners with disabilities was unlikely to occur within their context.

Schoeman stated in 1997 that "one of the biggest problems experienced by our parents (of Down Syndrome children) is assessments. The reality of the new act (S. A. Schools Act) has simply not dawned on schools, that the kind of norm referenced assessments which has been the basis of the admissions policy of schools, is not valid any more" (1997:12). It seems as if parents of learners without disabilities are not sufficiently aware of the implications of legislation, a situation which can lead to misunderstanding and mistrust.

The issue of an age related ceiling for inclusive education has been noted in the literature both concerning the quality of peer relationships and the need of parents of learners with disabilities to provide more targeted life skill education to their children. In her study of the factors which influence parents choice of school placements for their children with disabilities, Jenkinson (1998:189) noted

a trend for learners to "move from the mainstream to special schools as secondary education approached, with the need for curriculum focusing on independent living skills playing an important part in this decision".

In the discussion of the results of a survey of teachers' and parents' attitudes towards inclusion Balboni and Pedrabissi (2000:157) refer to the perception that "the higher the school grade, the more complex inclusion becomes, since the 'distance' between the competencies of the student with mental retardation and those of his/her non-disabled classmates gets bigger……". In studies of peer relationships the stability of relationships over time is unsure and considered to be inadequately researched (Hall & McGregor, 2000:114).

4.3.4.5 Teacher and Classroom Concerns

The parents who expressed the most misgivings also were most vocal about their concern for the class teachers. It was felt that too much was being expected of the teacher in terms of management skills in larger classes, the ability to embrace curriculum changes and the personal resources to respond to an increasing diversity of learning needs. It was a perception of the parents that the teachers had not received sufficient training to deal with learners with disabilities and that they were in need of in-class support. In this regard it is interesting to note that in their review of the early literature on parental attitudes towards mainstreaming Galant and Hanline (1993:293) found that the "…most important factor parents cited for ensuring the success of an integrated setting is the training and support that teachers receive". In more current research literature, Farrell (2000:161) considers that there are many important research areas to further investigate in inclusive education one of which is "the views of teachers in mainstream schools – how are they prepared for inclusion, what training have they received, how do they work with support staff".

In quoting the views of Sarason (1990) Kaufmann,(1993:7) asserts that

> " attempts to reform education will make little difference until reformers understand that schools must exist as much for teachers as for students. Put another way, schools will be successful in nurturing the intellectual social, and moral development of children only to the extent that they also nurture such developments for teachers".

It seems as if the combination of the previously rather parallel systems of classroom teaching and support services is one of the central challenges to inclusive education and one of which better informed parents are fully cognizant. To this end it is seen that collaborative consultation amongst school personnel needs to be developed and encouraged and that teachers are "provided the information they need to understand the needs of learners with special educational needs" (Engelbrecht, Eloff & Newmark, 1997:82).

The participating parents view the classroom as the testing ground in which the effectiveness of inclusive education for all the learners will be judged. There was debate as to whether the goals of the inclusion placement for particular learners were both social and academic or whether merely being placed in a more normalised environment was the primary goal for most included learners.

It was a strong perception that the learners with Down Syndrome actually receive a poorer quality of education in the classroom, but that more individualised help was received out of the classroom. Research into whether learners with special educational needs learn more effectively in mainstream placements in at present inconclusive and it seems as if studies which have targeted learners with Down Syndrome suggest that the benefit in mainly social rather than academic (Farrell, 2000:157).

However, Grenot-Scheyer, Fisher and Staub (2001:2), state their conviction that an essential component of inclusive education is that "...students with disabilities

must have access to the core curriculum in age-appropriate general education classrooms in which social learning and academic learning are clearly linked and scaffolded". It seems that this combination can only be realistically achieved with considerable in-class support and careful curriculum adaptations, a situation which does not currently exist in South African state schools due to the more pressing problems of providing greater access to schooling (Dyson & Forlin, 1999:26).

4.3.4.6 The School's Communication with Parents

As the advent of inclusive schooling is seen by most proponents as being of benefit to all learners it seems prudent to involve the general parent body of schools in the necessary accompanying process of school renewal.

The focus group discussions were most fruitful in allowing the participating parents to discuss how better communication between the school and home could be effected. The parents of the focus groups suggested that more informal grade meetings in which these issues concerning policy and curriculum changes could be discussed. They also felt that their misgivings would be allayed if they had access to information about changes in situations in which true dialogue was encouraged.

Despite needing the assurance concerning the practice of inclusive education, all the parents felt that the decision to be an inclusive school had to be a decisive one and one which did not need preceding advocacy. To this end the parents acknowledged the role of the principal in taking the risk of trying something new. This element of risk-taking is underscored by Grenot-Scheyer, et al (2001:10) who, when commenting on schools who are successful at inclusion, state "...participants have built on what exits naturally within their communities and generally follow the direct dive-in approach captured in the widely known sportswear advertisement dictate, " Just do it".

### 4.3.5 Micro Contextual Issues

#### 4.3.5.1 Socialisation Outcomes:

It was most heartening to witness that it was at the level of direct personal interactions that the experience of inclusive education was seen to be most positive and beneficial to both learners and parents. This interpersonal engagement holds the promise of true community building and an involved and more accountable bottom-up approach to embracing rather than criticising change in this country.

Being in day to day contact with learners of differing abilities has also allowed both parents and learners to appreciate that the label given to the disability can never capture the individual characteristics which make each learner unique. This situation is supported by the recent research of Balboni and Pedrabissi (2000:158) whose results of a survey of parents strongly suggested that parents who had had experience of inclusion have ".....acquired more realistic and direct information and thus believe that the inevitable difficulties created by inclusion do not compromise their children's learning, but rather represent an opportunity for humane and cultural growth".

It was also encouraging to note that the parents had become involved in the inclusion process to the extent that they were aware of the obvious social advantages that this placement had afforded to the included children and that a sense of communal pride was evident in these achievements.

Despite the positive responses to personal interactions in an inclusive situation it is important to note that the participating parents were sometimes equivocal about the nature of the peer relationships. Some of the parents felt that the relationships were essentially of a helper/helpee nature. This situation could be

seen as an awkward one of perpetuating the feeling of disempowerment often expressed by people with disabilities by reflexively seeing or placing the person with disabilities in a needy rather than in a more equal situation. It is important for adults therefore to be alert to these often well intentioned responses to perceived disability as these behaviours can encourage learned helplessness and the continued socialization of children with disabilities into dependency roles. This kind of situation can be addressed over time through anti bias awareness in the teaching staff which can be concretely illustrated in more representative use of classroom materials and in the opportunities afforded to learners to express feelings and gain information about disability issues. (Shapiro, 1999:6)

#### 4.3.5.2 Focus on Behaviour and Individual Academic Goals

Another issue which reflected more personal responses to inclusive education was that learners with behaviour problems were often more of a concern to parents than learners with intellectual and physical disabilities. Shapiro-Barnard (in Grenot-Scheyer et al, 2001:8) give a more positive slant on this perception :

> "Even if there were no students with disabilities, the culturing of inclusive schools would still be important because the entrance of students with disabilities into the general education classes does not signify the presence of diversity in the school; it recognises and affirms the diversity that has always existed."

Some parents felt that inclusive education should be conditional on the assurance that its implementation did not impact upon the individual academic goals of other learners. These concerns, while perhaps reflecting a rather narrow and selfish interest, do have to be acknowledged by teachers and administrators as it seems as if the participating parents of children without disabilities still have primarily academic goals in mind when they make choices about schooling for their children.

## 4.4 CONCLUSIONS

The collected data pertaining to the research question has provided an array of different issues which the advent of inclusive education has made apparent within various inter-linking systems. Exposure to inclusive education through their children's placement in inclusive classrooms has afforded parents an opportunity to broaden their perceptions, debate issues of personal concern and compare similarities and differences within their experiences and perceptions. It seems as though parents' critical reflections of their experiences of inclusive education have allowed them to both acknowledge their immediate concerns and look beyond these to glimpse at a new wholeness which can be reflected in both education and society.

# CHAPTER 5 - SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this final chapter the research findings, conclusion, and recommendations are briefly discussed. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on this study.

## 5.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Even though the findings of this study are limited due to the small sample size of participating parents, their particular socio-economic status, level of education and the circumscribed geographical area in which they live, interviews and interactive group discussion yielded an interesting tapestry of human experiences relating to the introduction of change in people's lives and how particular people are interpreting and accommodating transitions which are altering the local cultural, social and political fabric.

The responses of parents to the research question yielded a broad range of issues which inclusive education has made evident in many social, community and personally related systems. These issues ranged from an awareness of the globalization of human activity to an appreciation of the value of having personal contacts with persons with disabilities.

The parents involved in this study had generally favourable attitudes towards inclusive education but were concerned about the details of its implementation. It was the perceived distance between theory and practice that seemed to make them distrustful of recent educational policy documents and question the extent to which the practical issues within inclusive classrooms were being monitored.

Parents who have had opportunities to be educated at a tertiary level can be expected to have an interest in and be knowledgeable about the education of their own children and the ability of the local school not only to counterpart their social and academic goals, but also manage changes in policy in an accountable and collaborative manner. It was thus in the area of the implementation of inclusive education in which the most concerns were expressed and particularly the extent to which this process is being monitored, evaluated and refined and whether teachers are sufficiently equipped to manage this greater diversity in the learning situation.

Parents expressed positive attitudes towards the leadership in the school and agreed that the decision to include learners with disabilities was one that did not need preceeding advocacy. It was felt, however that discussion around the implementation of inclusive education would be beneficial to all members of the school community and that this should be ongoing.

It was at the micro level of personal interactions that the most affirming responses to inclusive education were evident and it was through these interpersonal interactions that a more realistically based and less stereotyped view of disability was mediated to both learners and parents. Exposure to greater diversity has also allowed these parents to see that it is possible and indeed desirable to expose their children and children with disabilities to a wholeness of learning rather than predetermined, socially stratified and highly structured segments of learning and that it is within this process that the wholeness of each human being can be fully appreciated.

## 5.3 CONCLUSION

Parents can provide valuable feedback on the process of inclusive education and the extent to which communities are adapting to legislative changes within an emerging democracy.

The most valuable aspect of this limited research endeavour was to witness the opportunity that focus group discussions afforded parents to become critically reflective of their perceptions and experiences, while simultaneously enabling a process which could allow for an appraisal of various systems operating within and on the periphery of educational and social transition.

Through interactive discussion the participating parents revealed that they are willing to be part of the process of transformation of previously more homogeneous and structured educational environments and that this is possible even though they could be considered as the beneficiaries of the previous system of educational provision. It does seem, therefore, as if parents who are willing to engage in debate, are displaying attitudes which are starting to reflect the transformation of systems which recent policy documents have called for.

Parents can be used as a valuable resource in the practice of inclusive education. Through invitations to join in collaborative problem solving activities the educational process can be truly a shared experience where underlying assumptions of the past are continually challenged and where the kind of teaching and learning which is achieved is facilitated by, with and through the wider community.

## 5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.4.1 Educational Implications

Many of the themes which emerged from the data analysis related specifically to perceptions and experiences of a need to address practical issues relating to the understanding and implementation of educational reform.

#### 5.4.1.1 Understanding and Acceptance of Educational Policy

On a broader level the lack of personal knowledge and acceptance of the implications of educational policy such as contained within the S.A. Schools Act is an area in which more explicit communication to parents needs to be enabled. The Department of Education has produced a booklet for parents on their rights and responsibilities and this and further documentation should be given and explained to parents when they enroll their children in schools. Issues such as eligibility, school governance and the rights and responsibilities of all members of the educational community could also be routinely discussed in school and grade meetings so that the issues of human and civil rights becomes more tightly woven into discourse and practice and with time becomes a given and consistent reference point in the practice of democracy.

It should also be made clear to all parents that the need for assessment is applicable to all learners and that assessments are not for the purposes of exclusion, but rather to better understand the particular needs and inform the kind of supports which will enable each learner to reach his or her potential within an evolving learning environment.

#### 5.4.1.2 Teacher Training and Support

The participating parents were unanimous in their concern that teachers and to a lesser extent learners have been ill-prepared for the practicalities which the practice of inclusion has occasioned. Even though the parents had the perception that there was a sense of community amongst the teachers and that they are seen to support each other in informal ways, it would be preferable to structure a collaborative team approach within the entire teaching staff so that a shared responsibility for the success of the practice of inclusion is more visible to the parents and more available to the teachers. It is also possible that parents could be invited to participate in training and information sessions and that this would allow for a broader vision in terms of addressing the various needs of all the learners.

An essential goal of the staff development programme would be to ensure that there is a synergy between class teachers, parents and various levels and systems of support. Wherever possible support should be provided within the general classroom so that the point of performance and attainment of outcomes is enabled within the kind of heterogeneous environment which the greater community reflects.

#### 5.4.1.3 Anti-Bias Training

Teachers, parents, support personnel and learners could also become involved in anti-bias training and awareness. In this process curriculum development and staff training could be given another perspective through the examination of normative assumptions which trap people into thinking in stereotypical ways. These sessions would best be conducted in small groups where ample opportunity is afforded to participants to contribute to the uncovering of biases and ways in which human interaction is limited through these enactment of group perceptions.

#### 5.4.1.4 Learner and Teacher Preparation

Parents of the children with disabilities could be invited to talk to the learners and parents about disability issues and the need to adapt the schooling system to welcome and nurture a diversity of learning and social needs. This could be done in age appropriate ways through the use of stories and brain-storming sessions in which problem solving concerning various barriers to learning and learning environments could be discussed, role played and represented in various visual forms. A particularly affirming example of this kind of communication to learners is contained in the book "At the end of the day. Lessons learned in Inclusive Education" (Grenot-Scheyer, Fisher & Staub 2001:52-55). Communication with learners was enabled through differing strategies including question and answer sessions, the sharing of a photo collage of the disabled learner engaged in her favourite activities and the use of a Circle of Friends activities.

### 5.4.2 Recommendations for Further Research

The focus group is an important vehicle through which stake-holders in education can express their views and reflect on their experiences. It is therefore recommended that this type of participative research continue to inform both the theory and the practice of inclusive education.

Due sensitivity to venue must be considered when conducting focus groups as many situations could be inhibiting to the kind of genuine and honest reporting of perceptions and experiences which is most needed at this stage of our transformation in education. Many meetings which are conducted in public forums actually inhibit the kind of feedback which is most valuable in informing educational practice.

Further research in the perceptions and experiences of parents is recommended so that sound educational practice, which has the backing of the major constituency of parents, can be both embraced and advanced.

However it is important that further research efforts attempt to broaden the scope of the study of parents of children without disabilities by targeting larger samples of parents from varied settings with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and over longer periods of time. These studies could then be compared with further studies of distinctive groups so that differing experiences and models of delivery can be compared to inform support services, advocacy efforts and ongoing teacher and parent education.

## 5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this small study need to be viewed with some caution as data was derived from a limited sample of parents whose homogeneity in terms of sex, socio-economic status, past privilege, restricted geographical area and current educational levels have had the effect of circumscribing their access to varied life experiences. The consequence of this narrow sample was most noticeable in that the perceptions and experiences of the participating parents were not sufficiently appreciative of the extent of our still unequal society and the associated and continuing need to struggle against past privileges.

However it is hoped that this limited study has contributed towards attempts to procure feedback on the impact of inclusive education within a distinctive community. Shared cultural backgrounds and a reference to consensual language has enabled an appreciation of the current reality constructions of participating parents.

## 5.6 A PERSONAL REFLECTION

This study has allowed me to learn from a process in which the views and experiences of others have had to inform my own perceptions, thoughts and behaviours. It has been a lesson in humility and in the continual reframing of initial thoughts into more constructive cognitive frameworks.

I feel that if educational research can encourage and support ongoing and active self appraisals and collaborative reflective dialogue, it will allow change to become more personally enriching and consequently less threatening. It seems that personal engagement can enable positive contributions to the kind of continual reshaping of educational provision that communities will need to embrace and reflect in order to involve learning participants in meaningful and responsible learning.

Schools and communities can be affirmed in their endeavours to embrace and reflect transformation by inviting their constituencies to become involved in socially constructive exercises in which collaborative consultation is enabled at a level which invites personal engagement with the many issues which arise variously in different communities as a result of shifting policy directions. Personal engagement also allows for shared responsibility for the interpretation, monitoring and evaluation of educational outcomes, a more balanced partnership between parents and schools and ultimately for an active involvement in the practice of democracy.

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# APPENDIX A

Navrae
Enquiries
Imibuzo: Peter Prevent

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ISebe leMfundo leNtshona Koloni

Ms H Loebenstein
Educational Psychology and Specialised Education
Faculty of Education
University of Stellenbosch
Private Bag X1
MATIELAND
7602

RESEARCH PROPOSAL: The perceptions and experiences of inclusive education of parents of non-disabled learners at a school in the Western Cape.

Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research in schools in the Western Cape has been approved subject to the following conditions:

1. Principals, teachers and learners are under no obligation to assist you in your investigation.
2. Principals, teachers, learners and schools should not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation.
3. You make all the arrangements concerning your investigation.
4. All research should be conducted after school as educators' programmes should not be interrupted.
5. The investigation is not conducted during the fourth school term.
6. A photocopy of this letter is submitted to the principal of each school where the intended research is to be conducted.
7. Your research will be limited to Primary School.
8. A brief summary of the content, findings and recommendations is provided to the Director: Research.
9. The Department receives a copy of the completed report/dissertation/thesis addressed to:

The Director: Research
Western Cape Education Department
Private Bag 9114
CAPE TOWN
8000

We wish you success in your research.

Kind regards.

pp HEAD: EDUCATION
DATE: 19/04/01

NEEM ASSEBLIEF VERWYSINGSNOMMERS IN ALLE KORRESPONDENSIE / PLEASE QUOTE REFERENCE NUMBERS IN ALL CORRESPONDENCE / NCEDA UTHALE IINOMBOLO ZALO KWATHO KWAKO KONKE INKALEKWANO

# APPENDIX B

UNIVERSITEIT VAN STELLENBOSCH
UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH

14 May 2001

Dear

RESEARCH ON PARENTS' VIEWS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

My name is Harriet Loebenstein and I am a Learning Support Teacher who is currently doing my Master of Education (M. Ed.) at the University of Stellenbosch.

The Department of Educational Psychology and Specialised Education at the university is involved in a project which is investigating the experiences of Inclusive Education of various stakeholders, including parents, teachers and learners. Schools which have implemented Inclusive Education have been selected as sources of participants to join in group discussions in which views and experiences of Inclusive Education can be heard. It is felt that it is extremely important that at this stage of our educational transformation that researchers listen to what people have to say, what participants feel has worked and what areas of the inclusive educational system need more guidance and support.

**My particular area of this research project is listening to the views and experiences of the parents of learners without disabilities who are in inclusive classroom settings.** I feel that your school is an ideal source of parent participants as Inclusive Education has been practised in several classes over many years.

I would therefore greatly appreciate it if you would join a discussion group which will be held at the school on Thursday 14 June from 2.15 pm to 3.30 pm. The aim of this meeting is to provide a forum for parents to share and participate in an informal discussion around the topic of Inclusive Education. The National Department of Education is very aware of the contribution which parents have to make to the implementation and success of educational programmes.

Each participant's anonymity will be assured. All information gathered from the discussions will only be used for the purposes of this particular research project.

I look forward to meeting with you and sharing ideas and experiences.

Yours sincerely

HARRIET LOEBENSTEIN

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